

# FOLLOWING AFTER JESUS

Matthew 28:18-20

This year we will be focusing on the theme of discipleship. “Discipleship” has become a trendy word in religious circles over the last few years. Its popularity rests, in part, on the perception that it provides an emphasis upon Christianity’s personal, relational character that counters a culture-influenced tendency to emphasize religion’s institutional qualities. Another reason motivates discipleship’s popularity – it occupies an obvious and important place in Jesus’ teachings. Consider the following passages:

*Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. – Luke 14:25-27, 33<sup>1</sup>*

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” – Matthew 28:18-20*

Jesus, and the crowds of people who followed him, believed in the value of discipleship to him, lending credibility to its current popularity. So, adopting discipleship as our theme for 2022 allows us to practice our obedience to Jesus in a way that creates opportunities for us to engage the religious culture around us. But what exactly do we mean by discipleship?

“If anyone would come after me...”<sup>2</sup>

- The gospels often portray Jesus’ relationship with people as master and disciple. For example:
  - Jesus selected twelve disciples (*Matthew 10:1-4; 11:1*).
  - The apostles regularly called Jesus “master” (*cf. Luke 5:5; 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49; etc.*).
  - A larger group of people followed Jesus who were also called disciples (*Matthew 8:18-22; 12:15, 46-50; Luke 10:1-12*).
  - “Disciple” became a prominent way to describe Christians in the book of Acts (*cf. Acts 6:1, 7*).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:24.



- The master/disciple relationship used to describe Jesus' connection to his followers commonly existed in Jesus' Jewish world and referred to anyone who sought out a teacher and followed their instruction (cf. *Mark 2:18; Matthew 22:16; 14:12; 11:2*).
- Jesus used the master/disciple relationship but made some notable changes. He, for example:
  - Sought disciples rather than waiting for them to come to him (*Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9; 10:1-4*).
  - Demanded complete and total devotion to him (cf. *Luke 14:25-27*).
  - Did not allow his disciples to choose another master or to become masters themselves (cf. *Matthew 10:24-25*).
  - Based the relationship upon love for him that motivated his disciples to submit themselves to him rather than merely basing it upon knowledge or obedience alone (*John 8:31-32; 14:15, 21, 23-24*).
- The ways in which Jesus changed the master/disciple relationship he used with his followers mirrored God's relationship with Israel in the Hebrew Bible.
  - God selected Israel and entered a covenant relationship with them (*Exodus 19:5-6; cf. Leviticus 26:12*).
  - The Bible describes Israel's obedience to its covenant obligations as 'following God' and 'walking in his ways' (cf. *Deuteronomy 4:6-8*).
  - Following God and walking in His ways involved a love-motivated relationship of faithful obedience (*Deuteronomy 10:12-22*).
  - Jesus' relationship with the twelve disciples mirrored God's relationship with Israel – Jesus selected a representative Israel in the apostles and entered a special relationship with him in which they were expected to follow him and obey him (cf. *Matthew 4:18-22; John 14:8-11*).
- Jesus' use of the master/disciple relationship, especially considering the way the New Testament writers understood it, reveal its deeper purpose – it provided a way for people to return to God's intention for humanity.
  - God created humans to represent His identity and will within the creation, which required them to know Him and be like Him (*Genesis 1:26-28*).
  - Humanity's rejection of God's plan broke their relationship with Him and eventually led to them to lose their awareness of God (cf. *Genesis 3; Hosea 4:1-2*).
  - Jesus, as God in human form (*John 1:1, 14, 18; Colossians 2:9*), calls people to follow him and to learn about God through him (cf. *John 14:8-9*).
  - Following Jesus and imitating him allows people to bear God's image (*John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11-18; 4:7-11*), to represent God's Jesus-focused will and to draw the world's attention Him (*Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 3:1-12; 1 Peter 2:9-12*).
- These things lead us to our definition of discipleship, the definition on which we will focus ourselves this year:

***Discipleship is our commitment to follow Jesus and learn from him so that we can be like him and lead others to him.***



## Applications

- Discipleship is not merely about following a set of rules; it is about the intentional cultivation of a relationship with God through Jesus. We should consequently shift our concerns away from “what should I do?” to “who is God?”; understanding God’s identity allows us to understand what to do.
- Discipleship pursues the radical goal of character transformation; discipleship does not simply ‘tidy up’ our existing life, but instead seeks to motivate us to “lose it” in favor of a better one (*Matthew 10:38-39*). We must, therefore, be prepared to restructure all our relationships so that Jesus, rather than self, family, friends, or work, resides at the center (*Matthew 10:34-39*).
- While the challenges of discipleship to Jesus will bring hardships (*cf. Matthew 10:34*), it offers something far more valuable – real life, genuine freedom, and meaningful purpose (*John 6:48-51; 8:31-32; 1 Peter 2:9*).

Jesus calls disciples; he calls people to willingly submit themselves to him and his teachings with the goal of becoming more and more like him. Have you submitted yourself to Jesus and to the relationship into which he calls you?

