

# An Overview of Discipleship



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“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people’ ”  
(Matt. 4:18, 19, NRSV).

# Fishers of People and Cow Herders

## INTRODUCTION

Mark 1:17

What is discipleship, besides a buzzword in Christian circles? The word *disciple* conjures up a scene of bearded, sandaled men leaving nets and families behind to follow Jesus. The image is strange and out of the ordinary in our culture, where learning is usually confined to a classroom and textbooks. Was Jesus' call to follow Him a biblical, only-Jesus-could-pull-it-off moment? Or was it a realistic, can-happen-even-today incident?

A study of the history of discipling may surprise you. There have been masters and disciples long before the call of Jesus, long before His birth, and long before Israel was ever called to be a nation. The ancient system of schooling in the East—in countries like India and Nepal—took place in a *gurukhul*. A *gurukhul* was the home of a teacher (the guru) and his students (the *shishyas*). The study environment was based on three principles: (1) all students were the same, irrespective of social standing, age, or knowledge;

and were to live in a spirit of co-dependency; (2) the teacher was to be both followed and imitated; (3) all of life's tasks had value and were to be carried out with all of oneself—

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even the task as mundane as taking care of cows! Belonging to a *gurukhul* was an honor; and alumni of the *gurukhul* were called *gothra*, which means “cow herders”!

The students lived with the teacher, and in so doing, learned from the teacher. They learned of his ways, and imbibed from him knowledge in the hope of being wiser and better human beings when they left him. In imitating their leader, they became more like him. Similarly, we learn by imitation. We learn by imitating our parents early in life, and then by imitating role models. Very little in life is truly original in that sense.

The students of the *gurukhul* also supported one another. When one was weak, another stepped in strong. When one was sad, another comforted. When one was tempted, another encouraged. Similarly, it is not enough to be a student of the Bible and a follower of Jesus when we cannot extend that knowledge and relationship into all of life's relationships. As disciples, we are to be nurturers and gatherers of saints, always pointing to Christ—our Guru.

True disciples accept their calling with grace, humility, and joy. Disciples are those who do whatever they are called to do and to wear their titles with honor—even if their title is that of cow herder!

## Discipleship— Telling It Like It Is

### LOGOS

Matt. 4:18–22; 10:24, 25; Mark 3:13, 14; 8:34, 35

Jesus lived when stories were used very specifically. A story wasn't just something you read to put a child (or an adult) to sleep. Stories were used to derive a legal conclusion, teach a moral lesson, illustrate an idea in philosophy or in faith, or to share a wondrous event. And these stories were told in three different styles: as in a dream and as something that does not really take place in the physical world; as a real event but related as a metaphor; or as a real event but related in an exaggerated manner to emphasize certain points.

In making His call to discipleship (Luke 14:26, 27, 33), Jesus goes all out on the storytelling tactic of exaggeration and draws a mental picture of a disciple: The man is standing in the doorway of his house, a new disciple ready to embark on a journey. To publicly display his 100 percent commitment to follow this radical Man, Jesus, he's called the leaders of his community to bear witness of what he is about to do. The neighbors are there, and so is the press. This is important, because it's

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big and it doesn't happen often—the man writes off his parents forever. He is now dead to them. He blesses his wife and children into a new life without him. He executes his new will and testament; he donates all his

things to Goodwill, except the clothes on his back and the extra set in his satchel. And then as a final salute to his calling, the man calls to his neighbors to pick up the heavy cross made especially for him and strap it to his back. That cross, he claims, will remain on his back throughout his discipling journey!

This severely exaggerated story of Jesus can scare the average Christian. It's as though Christ is calling us to be suicide bombers—forget yourself, your family, your job, your life—just strap a bomb to yourself and die for the cause, if that's what it takes! Not many of us can commit like this, so we end up feeling like we'd never live up to Jesus' expectations of a disciple and that we might as well give up right now.

What we need to remember is that Jesus was trying to make a point. He wanted there to be no doubt about the level of commitment He expects, about the magnitude of the call, and the power of the Spirit offered to each of us so we can be His disciples. Let's convert the storytelling technique of exaggeration into today's plain language to understand what Jesus was saying.

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## **The Urgency of the Call (Matt. 4:19)**

When Jesus called His disciples, there had to be something in His voice, in His body language, and in His demeanor that expressed urgency. We know this was probably true because of what the disciples did. Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. This does not mean they stopped being fishermen and husbands. There are numerous references in the Bible to their occupation and their homes after this call. They continued living like regular people and carried out their societal and family responsibilities. The key point is that the moment they said Yes to Jesus, they put Him first and everything else second.

When Jesus calls us to be disciples, the time to answer is *now*. The lifestyle of stewardship demands an immediate response.

## **The Prerequisite of the Call (Matt. 11:29)**

When He called them to be fishers of people, Jesus had no intention of sending them in pairs at that very moment. That call was to walk with Him, learn from Him, abide in Him—until such a time came that He was ready to send them (Mark 3:13, 14).

The prerequisite then is to learn at His feet before following at His heel. When we're called to be disciples, our Creator God personally trains and equips us for the task. We need to remember that we are merely tools placed in His hands. We have nothing to fear.

## **The Side Effects of the Call (Mark 8:34, 35)**

This is the most amazing perk of accepting the call to discipleship: When the disciples recognized the urgency of the call and made it their priority, they were immediately placed in a training program to emulate Christ. And in doing so, they experienced awesome side effects:

(a) Cross-bearing (putting Christ above self, family, job, culture, and everything) was a joyous, willing, and voluntary act; and (b) witnessing was a natural way of life!

When we are true disciples, what was once difficult is now a piece of cake. This is not because of our own strengths, but because in imitating Jesus, we become more and more like Him each day.

So what Jesus was really saying is that a life of true discipleship requires Him alone as Lord of our hearts and lives. He's not calling us to a one-time zealous act of martyrdom. He's calling us to a life-long expression and reflection of His love. The result? Everyone around us will yearn to be disciples too!

## **REACT**

1. What are the privileges that come with being a disciple? See John 15:7–16.
2. Think of phrases that describe discipleship (e.g., growing in the image of Christ). Consider scenarios in your church where you can use these phrases to encourage Christian growth.

# In Response to His Commission

## TESTIMONY

Isa. 43:10

“Great multitudes followed Christ, and He welcomed with joy all who came to Him for instruction; but the Searcher of hearts knew who in the throngs that daily pressed about Him were really disposed to own Him as the promised Messiah. Many who witnessed His miracles thought that the power which could heal the sick, feed five thousand men with five barley loaves and two small fishes, and raise the dead, would be a great help to them in their temporal necessities. They had followed Christ in the hope that He would be exalted to David’s throne. They wanted the highest place. But Christ would not have men count upon ease and earthly advantages in connecting themselves with Him. In His lesson He taught them that self-denial and the most difficult sacrifice must be expected of all who would become His disciples. Those who engage in His service must be ready to give up their dearest friends and relatives, to be despised as fanatics and fools, and to suffer bodily harm for His name’s sake. If they should become discouraged by what the world might say or do; if they should not endure the test of their love and loyalty; if they refused to keep God’s command-

ments because their neighbors made sport of them, they could not perfect that faith which works by love, and purifies the soul.”<sup>1</sup>

Have “. . . I made others  
happy?”

“Closely examine your own heart, and the state of your affections

toward God. Inquire, Have I devoted the precious moments of today in seeking to please myself, seeking for my own amusement? or have I made others happy? Have I helped those connected with me to greater devotion to God and to appreciate eternal things? Have I brought my religion into my home, and there revealed the grace of Christ in my words and in my deportment?”<sup>2</sup>

## REACT

1. Why do we sometimes cover up the fact that God means so much to us?
2. How do you define witnessing?

1. *The Signs of the Times*, July 21, 1898.

2. *Messages to Young People*, p. 122.

# Walking in His Footsteps

## EVIDENCE

1 John 2:6

It all started one day on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus called Andrew and his brother Peter to follow Him. Later that day, He called two others, James and his brother John. They too, without hesitation, left everything behind and answered Jesus' call for them to follow Him. Then there was Philip, Nathanael, Matthew, and the rest who formed the core team of Christ's ministry (Matt. 4:18–22; 9:9; Mark 1:16–20; John 1:43–45). These disciples learned from Jesus by walking where He walked and by sitting down with the crowds when He taught.

After His death and before His ascension to heaven, Jesus gave His disciples and all who believed Him, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20).

According to Eusebius, the father of church history, the disciples indeed did scatter to all the nations to spread the good news.<sup>1</sup> This was affirmed by the church historian Schumacher who recounted the places where they went and had died—Matthew to Ethiopia, Mark to Egypt, Luke and Andrew to Greece, Thomas to India, Paul and Peter to Rome, the two James to Jerusalem, Bartholomew to Asia, etc., where they all died as martyrs for their faith.<sup>2</sup>

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divided into two parts. . . .

We are Christians today because of the great commission of Christ, which has been continuously proclaimed throughout the past centuries by men and women of faith like these Twelve. Today, we too can be His disciples, His followers, when we “walk even as He walked.”

For the Christian then, discipleship means walking and following in the footsteps of Jesus. Following Jesus can be divided into two parts: (1) discovering how Jesus lived and how God wants us to live (Bible study), and (2) putting what we learn into practice (obedience).

## REACT

1. What does it mean to leave everything behind to follow Jesus?
2. Why do some who profess to be believers fail to continue in their faith?

1. Grant R. Jeffrey, “The Martyrdom of the Apostles,” *The Signature of God* (Frontier Research Publications, Inc., 1996), pp. 254–257. Retrieved November 27, 2006 from <http://www.direct.ca/trinity/disciples.html>.

2. Ibid.

# The Upward Trail and Climb

## HOW-TO

2 Tim. 4:5

Mountains and hills were created by God for a purpose. Aside from the beauty, provisions, refuge, and protection, they also furnish an activity—either sports or recreation—to test people’s strength, fortitude, capabilities, and desire to come closer to God. Mountain climbing provides an interesting object lesson for discipleship.

With both mountain climbing and discipleship, the task is not easy and poses a challenge to some and an adventure to others. The trail upward may not be safe or smooth, and hence entails risks and hardships. While it may be exhausting, reaching the summit is refreshing and victorious.

The steps on how to climb the mountain of discipleship involve five P’s. The key text today enumerates the various traits of an effective disciple.

**1. Pledge.** You must be determined to get to the top. Full-hearted commitment and confiding everything to the Lord are needed before one embarks on discipleship endeavors (Ps. 37:5).

**2. Plan.** One must check the weather and do some research on the terrain.

**Never climb alone.**

Smart disciples study and plan the strategies they are to utilize (2 Tim. 2:15). Before sending away His disciples, Jesus revealed the character

and plan of the battle, and laid open before them the perils they would encounter.<sup>1</sup>

**3. Prepare.** The foremost thing to prepare for the rigorous climb is training one’s body through daily physical exercises, which build up stamina and endurance. One has to put on protective climbing gear. The preparation for discipleship is to be made day by day in treasuring the precious truths of God’s Word, and through prayer, strengthening one’s faith (Eph. 6:10–17).<sup>2</sup>

**4. Pair with someone.** Never climb alone. In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary conquered the highest point on earth with the able help of a Sherpa climber, Norgay Tensing. Disciples need God to climb with them (Ps. 18:32, 33).

**5. Persevere.** A successful climber is one who presses on and reaches the top. Successful disciples are those who achieve their goals (Phil. 1:6).

## REACT

Does one need to reach the pinnacle before he or she can be called a true disciple?

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 197.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

# Discipleship: The Key to Church Growth

Thursday  
January 3

## OPINION

2 Tim. 2:1, 2

The cry of most every church today is the loss of members. Where are they? The answer to me seems rather simple: The more disciples, the more church members. Seems like a logical equation to me: One goes out to share the message with another— $1 + 1$  now equals 2. The 2 repeat the process, and 2 becomes 4. With true discipleship in the church, reaching the billions of the world is a difficult, but not impossible task.

Yet, often the church, instead of aggressively training and sending out disciples, resorts to commercial marketing strategies to build its members: free breakfast buffet for the on-timers; a mini box of chocolates for those who ask for house visitation; etc. And we, as members, tend to underestimate our testimonies by equating discipling with teaching and by convincing ourselves that we can never be disciples.

What we need to do is repaint the picture of discipleship. We need to focus less on the degrees and qualifications of the disciple and focus more on the relationship and mentoring index of the potential disciple. God calls us to share Him—not necessarily from behind a pulpit—but from within a friendship.

**Like the loaves and fish, disciples need to be multiplied.**

Next, we need to understand that when Jesus calls us to follow Him, He also calls us to lead. A growing church multiplies its leaders. Like the loaves and fish, disciples need to be multiplied. If Jesus wanted to be the only leader in the world of Christians, He would have seriously considered living on earth forever! Instead, He delegated the responsibility of leadership from Himself to His disciples.

Finally, discipleship is not an elective course for the Christian. Jesus doesn't say, "Come walk with Me and live with Me to see if you'd like to be My disciple." When He makes the call, He expects the commitment. Too often we don't see that being a Christian and being a disciple are the same.

It's about time that we did!

## REACT

Identify elements in church activities that discourage members from participation. What can be done to change this?

Friday  
January 4

## “Disciples— Eternity’s Doorkeepers”

### EXPLORATION

Matt. 14:18, 19

### CONCLUDE

Since Jesus’ disciples learn and communicate not just the wisdom of their Teacher but the eternal life He earned for us, His disciples stand at the gates of eternity for many. His disciples must not struggle for position, or rank others according to perceived worthiness. They must continually stay in touch with their Master and with other disciples.

### CONSIDER

- Drawing a “twenty-first-century disciple.” Draw or trace someone between 18–35 years of age. On either side of the figure, list qualities and abilities a modern disciple should have. Then draw lines to the appropriate places on the body. (Example: Draw a line to the hand, labeling it “Helps people in need.”)
- Using the maps in a good study Bible, or an online Web site such as <http://www.bible.ca/maps>, calculate the actual distance Jesus and His disciples covered as they traveled on their discipling missions. Using a rate of two to three miles an hour, calculate the time they spent walking.
- Gathering three or four children’s songs about soul winning (such as “I Will Make You Fishers of Men”) into a medley, lead the children in singing these songs during children’s storytime at church, or in their Sabbath School classes after telling a brief story.
- Writing a job description for a modern-day disciple, copy the format of your own job description at work, or google “writing a job description” for how-to instructions.
- Taking an “observational prayer walk” through your community, study each home carefully, and pray about what you see. For example, if there are toys outside, pray for the children.

### CONNECT

John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*; Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*.

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