

Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 18:13–27, Matt. 4:19, 9:9, Mark 3:13–19, 8:31–38, Rom. 8:18.*

Memory Text: “‘This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples’” (*John 15:8, NIV*).

It is important that we use our intellectual capacities to grasp as much as is humanly possible of what God has revealed to us. Yet, perfect knowledge of all doctrine is not a prerequisite for salvation. We are, though, commanded to do all the things that we have been instructed to do. To be a disciple is to be a lifelong learner and follower of the Master.

What is a disciple? *The SDA Bible Dictionary* defines it, basically, as “one who, as a student or adherent, follows the teaching of another, especially of a public teacher. In the NT ‘disciple’ is the translation of the Gr. *mathētēs* . . . which is related to *manthanō*, ‘to learn,’ hence means ‘a learner,’ ‘a pupil,’ ‘an adherent.’”—Page 288. Let’s look a little closer at what it means to be a disciple.

The Week at a Glance: A disciple is a lifelong learner. When Christ calls us, we are to follow, wherever He leads and no matter the suffering involved, for it will involve suffering if for no other reason than it must involve sacrifice. In human terms the rewards for discipleship seem rather meager. But when the true dimension of life in Christ is discovered, we realize it’s worth suffering for, no matter the cost here and now.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 6.

Followers and Leaders

Read Exodus 18:13–27. What principles of leadership can be found in these verses? What can we learn from them about leaders and followers?

Although all people are fundamentally equal in the eyes of God, there are major differences in the manner in which they function. Some have the gift of leadership. Our society, and every organization within society, would soon collapse if there were no leaders. Even in heaven there appears to be a distinct differentiation in roles: There are, for instance, angels and archangels! When God called His people out of Egypt, He appointed leaders. When He organized a sanctuary service, He made sure there would be adequate leadership. God worked through judges, prophets, kings, and so on.

But leaders are useless without followers who are willing to accept their leadership. In particular, they need a group of close associates who are willing to learn from their leader and to assist in the realization of the goals of their leader.

Jesus called 12 disciples. Read Mark 3:13–19 for a condensed version of His selection of 12 men. What other examples of teachers who surrounded themselves with disciples do we find in a Gospel story? *See Mark 2:18.*

There was nothing extraordinary in the fact that Jesus had a group of disciples. It was customary for teachers to have a following of “interns.” What was remarkable, however, were the kind of men Jesus chose. Jesus saw a potential in these men that most of us would not have discerned! What also is remarkable was their instant willingness to leave their daily business and follow this Carpenter from Nazareth. They apparently saw something extraordinary in this Man that even most of His own relatives had not discovered yet.

It should, however, be noted that although the Twelve are a very special group, there are also many others referred to in the Gospels as “disciples.”

There tends to be in some societies an antileadership attitude; in contrast, in some societies people all but blindly follow their leaders. What’s the tendency in your society, and how do you strike a proper balance?

Marks of Discipleship: Obedience and Loyalty

Jesus did not just share knowledge with His disciples, although it must have been a tremendous privilege to constantly hear Jesus explain the Scriptures and answer the numerous questions with which the spiritual leaders of His day bombarded Him. They quickly noticed what others also perceived. He taught with an authority that surpassed the scholars of His day. He separated lifeless traditions from the real-life issues that God's Word addresses. However, there was more the disciples needed to learn. They also needed to learn to make their own will and desires subject to the will of the Almighty.

What principles of discipleship can we find in the following texts? *Matt. 4:19, 9:9, Mark 8:34.*

“Yes, follow Him through evil as well as through good report. Follow Him in befriending the most needy and friendless. Follow Him in being forgetful of self, abundant in acts of self-denial and self-sacrifice to do others good; when reviled, reviling not again; manifesting love and compassion for the fallen race. He counted not His life dear, but gave it up for us all. Follow Him from the lowly manger to the cross. He was our example.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 178.

How did Peter react when many followers deserted Jesus? *John 6:60–70.*

Not all disciples stayed with Jesus. Many turned away. Peter spoke for the disciples when declaring their allegiance. With the exception of Judas, they eventually did prove to be faithful followers, and they became leaders in the early church, even though they had moments of grave doubt and disillusionment when their Master was taken prisoner and crucified. Their experience gives us great comfort. Many of us have had moments when our resolve to be disciples was at low tide, but as in the case of the apostles, this does not mean that we cannot overcome our temporary lapse.

If someone were to ask you, “How loyal are you to Jesus?” how would you respond, and why? What outward evidences do you give of your loyalty to Him?

Sacrifice

Most of us like to be with important people. Meeting a head of state or a government minister or a celebrity provides us with a much-coveted conversation topic. Knowing someone important, or even knowing someone who knows someone important, somehow seems to endow us with a halo of glory. It seems a natural desire to climb up the social ladder rather than remain near its base. Jesus' disciples were no exception to this unfortunate human trait.

How did some disciples (and their relatives) hope that following Jesus would enhance their status? What was Jesus' reply? *Matt. 20:20–23, Mark 10:35–41. What does this attitude remind you of? Isa. 14:12–14.*

Rather than promising His disciples material prosperity and social status, Jesus prepared them for a different kind of reality: Following Him is a costly business.

Read Mark 8:31–38. What do you learn in this passage about the cost of discipleship?

In his famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian who was martyred by the Nazis in 1945, emphasizes that divine grace does not come cheap. And following Christ is not an easy thing to do. It inevitably will involve suffering. Just as Christ said that He “must suffer,” so must we. If we want to identify with Him in His life, we must also do so in His suffering and death. “To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity. . . . Only a man . . . totally committed in discipleship can experience the meaning of the cross. The cross is there, right from the beginning, or he has only got to pick it up; there is no need for him to go out and look for a cross for himself, no need for him deliberately to run after suffering. Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), p. 98.

What is the cross that God has given you to bear? What has following Christ cost you? If your answer is “Nothing, really,” maybe you need to take a closer look at how closely you are following the Master.

The Rewards of Discipleship

Jesus left His disciples with no doubt that following Him would require sacrifice. He was totally up front with them in regard to what they should expect.

What did Jesus promise as far as immediate or short-term reward for following Him as a disciple? *Luke 9:57, 58; John 15:18–25*. What specific “promise” did Jesus have for Peter? *John 21:15–18*. What does this tell us about the cost of following Christ?

The disciples, except Judas, eventually became the apostles. From the first chapters of the book of Acts, it is clear that these men had learned many lessons. They had been with Jesus, and now, with the power of the Spirit, they were able to deal with opposition and persecution. Although we cannot be sure about the details, there is good reason to believe the strong traditions from the early church era which say that all apostles eventually suffered martyrdom. All supposedly suffered a violent death, except John, but his imprisonment on Patmos was not a luxurious vacation either. He also was a “brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus” (*Rev. 1:9, NIV*).

What aspect of discipleship outweighs all suffering that might come our way as we follow Christ? *John 10:10, Rom. 8:28–39*.

Those who follow Christ will face numerous challenges. If they stay focused on their Master, they will be able to deal with whatever happens. They will have something that is precious beyond words. He gives them His peace, which is unlike the imperfect and transient kind of peace the world offers (*John 14:27*). It is the peace that transcends all understanding (*Phil. 4:7*). That peace is the hallmark of the abundant life that Christ gives to His disciples (*John 10:10*). In spite of all trials and temptations, this is the kind of life that satisfies at a level beyond the reach of those who choose to live without Christ.

And yet, even more so, faithful followers of Christ have the assurance of eternal life, the assurance that whatever they struggle with now can't be compared with the promise of eternity that awaits them.

Read Romans 8:18. What hope and comfort can you draw from this promise for yourself? Why should it tell you to never, never give up?

The Lordship of Jesus Christ

Being a disciple implies the recognition of having a master, of allegiance to someone we are willing to follow and serve. Our relationship to others usually finds expression in the manner in which we address them.

What was one of the titles given to Christ by His followers? *John 20:28, 1 Cor. 16:22.*

The New Testament uses a variety of names for Jesus. He is called “the Son of God” but also “the Son of Man” or “the Messiah.” Hundreds of times Jesus is referred to as “the Lord.” This word, which initially was quite general in its application, became a highly significant term for the early Christians. The Roman emperor claimed divinity and wanted to be addressed as “the Lord.” To confess that Christ was their ultimate Lord rather than the Roman Caesar was not just expressing an opinion. It literally could be a matter of life or death. Those who lived in the Roman realm should only have one *Kyrios* (lord), and to apply this title to any person other than the emperor could well end in torture and death.

Thus, it required faith and dedicated discipleship to call Jesus “Lord.” But today it also is no small thing to call Jesus our Lord and truly mean it. If He is our Lord, He is the Sovereign over our whole life, over all that we say and do.

What is the key element that reveals how genuine we are in calling Jesus “Lord”? *Matt 7:22, 23; Luke 6:46.*

It’s one thing to call Jesus our Lord and our God and to profess faith, love, and allegiance to Him. It’s quite another to truly live it. Jesus was clear: Our fidelity to Him will be manifested by our obedience to Him and to His commands. In fact, the word for “iniquity” in Matthew 7:23 means “lawlessness.” No question, a true follower of Jesus, a true disciple, will obey His commandments (*John 14:15*).

Try to imagine how different our church would be if everyone who professed to follow Christ were truly disciples of Jesus. What differences would we see? While you can’t change others, what difference could you make were your life one of true conformity to Jesus’ will?

Further Study: For comments on the calling of the disciples, read Ellen G. White, “‘We Have Found the Messiah,’” pp. 132–143, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“It was not enough for the disciples of Jesus to be instructed as to the nature of His kingdom. What they needed was a change of heart that would bring them into harmony with its principles. Calling a little child to Him, Jesus set him in the midst of them; then tenderly folding the little one in His arms He said, ‘Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ The simplicity, the self-forgetfulness, and the confiding love of a little child are the attributes that Heaven values. These are the characteristics of real greatness.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 437.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, go over the question of what it costs to be a true follower of Christ. Ask those who are willing to discuss it, what it costs them to follow the Lord. Ask, too, why they believe it is worth it.
- 2 What can we do to help the new believers among us become better disciples of Christ? Why is being a disciple so much more than just intellectually consenting to a number of doctrines, or even more than believing that Jesus died for your sins?
- 3 We are called to be disciples of Jesus. But on the human level, we also have role models. Is it legitimate to consider ourselves also disciples of a human leader we respect and consider a role model? If so, how could we do this while at the same time not forgetting to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance?
- 4 How can we fight the sinful human desire for more self-glory, more adulation, more power and prestige? Why are such desires so contrary to all that it means to be a disciple of Christ?

Summary: To be a disciple of Christ is no small thing. It requires a lot of conviction and stamina and a willingness to follow the Lord, regardless of the suffering involved. To be a disciple of Christ means to live by faith, to trust God even in the hardest of times. It means to be willing to die to self and live for the good of others and for the glory of God.

The Kettle Failed Not

by RUSS DAWIS

A colleague and I climbed the mountains of Southern Mindanao in the Philippines to survey a possible site that a tribal chief had donated for an Adventist high school for the Higaonan people. While in the area, we were invited to stay in the home of Pangga Landagan.

The man received us warmly, made us comfortable, and offered us food. I knew the family wasn't well-to-do and asked why he felt so generous toward the SULADS missionaries.

"It is my blessing and joy to take care of you," our host said. "For when we care for His children, God blesses us even more abundantly." Then he explained his remark. "When two SULADS missionary teachers came to the village, they seemed shy and hesitant to visit the homes in the village. I knew that their small stipend would not be enough to buy food, so my wife and I invited them to eat with us so that they would have good food while they worked for our people.

"One day we had just enough rice for one meal for two people. But our missionaries hadn't eaten that day, so I whispered to my wife, 'Let's feed the missionaries first. She agreed and cooked the rice and served the missionaries.

"While they ate I slipped out to look for food, but I came back empty-handed and hungry. I checked the kettle in the kitchen, expecting only a handful of leftovers. To my surprise, the kettle was full!

"I whispered to my wife, 'Haven't you fed the missionaries yet?'"

"'Yes, they've eaten,' she said. 'And I've eaten too.'"

"'But the kettle's full!' I said.

"'That can't be!' my wife protested. I showed her the kettle, still full of rice. 'It's an Elijah miracle,' I whispered.

"Together we thanked God for providing for our needs and those of the missionaries too. The constant rain made it impossible for our missionary guests to leave for the next village as they had planned, so that evening my wife reheated the rice and we ate from the full pot. Again we let them eat first, and then I looked at the pot. It was still full!

"In the morning the kettle was still full, and again my wife reheated it for breakfast before the missionaries left on their journey.

"From that day on, I see that any visitor in our village receives the best we can offer. And as always we see that our food containers and kettle fail not."

"Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (*Psalms 34:10, NIV*). As we support world mission with our offerings, we will see that God will provide all our needs.

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