

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 of 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 about 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 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?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *John 15:8*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Discipleship is a lifelong reflection of Jesus.

Feel: The Holy Spirit guide you through your journey of discipleship.

Do: Persevere through the sufferings that come as a result of a life devoted to Christ.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. The Work of a Disciple (*Matt. 28:19*)

A Matthew 28:19 often is referred to as the Great Commission. Here Jesus gives His disciples their most important task, to make more disciples in His name. What do you see as your role in the Great Commission?

B Spreading the gospel is an important part of discipleship. But the apostles did much more than that. Their ministry spread to many other areas. How is discipleship more than just conversion, baptism, and adding to the church?

II. The Guide of a Disciple (*Acts 1:8*)

Before He ascended to heaven, Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides us as disciples. How have you been influenced by the Holy Spirit in your life?

III. The Motivation of a Disciple (*Rom. 8:17, 18*)

Paul, a great example of discipleship, acknowledges the suffering associated with following Christ. Yet, despite that suffering, he was a devoted disciple of Christ. What convicts you to be the same?

▶ **Summary:** A disciple's life is filled with the presence of God. It is a lifelong devotion. Make or renew this commitment, and honor it regardless of trials.

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?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Answering the call to discipleship means leaving the old life behind to follow Jesus.

The burly fisherman rushed to his home and announced, “I’ve got a new job. I’m not going fishing anymore.”

His wife looked puzzled and suspicious. What would that new job be? After all, her husband was just a fisherman.

Peter, however, was sure of his calling. “I’m going to be a fisher of men,” he said.

But the voice from the kitchen revealed a mixture of sarcasm and anger: “We don’t eat men; we eat fish.”

Undeterred, Peter left the nets and followed Jesus. Such is the cost and compulsion of discipleship.

Consider This: *Disciple* means a *follower*. Peter and Andrew (*Mark 1:16–18*), two disciples of the Baptist (*John 1:35–37*), Matthew (*Matt. 9:9*), Philip (*John 1:43*), and indeed, all the disciples (*Matt. 19:27*) left everything and followed Jesus. Leaving and following are thus essential prerequisites to discipleship. What have you left? To what extent are you following?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Socrates had Plato. Gamaliel had Saul. Leaders of various religions had their devout followers. The difference between discipleship in such cases and the discipleship of Jesus is that the former is based on the content of a philosophy or teaching, whereas the latter is rooted in the accomplishment of Jesus. What Jesus achieved is redemption from sin through His death and resurrection. Thus, Christian discipleship rests not so much on Christ’s teachings as on what He did for the salvation of humanity. Hence, Jesus bids all His followers to identify themselves fully with Him and take up their cross and follow Him (*Matt. 10:38, Mark 8:34; see also Luke 9:23*). Without walking in the footprints of Calvary, there is no Christian discipleship. (Stress this point as you teach today.)

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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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Bible Commentary**

Overview: The word *disciple* occurs some 269 times in the New Testament, mostly in the Gospels and Acts. To be a disciple of Jesus is the most life-fulfilling experience one can have. It energizes the spirit, challenges the mind, and demands our utmost in our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. It is important, therefore, to explore what makes a disciple and what are the marks of discipleship.

I. The Making of a Disciple (*Review Matthew 28:19 with your class.*)

Discipleship is not self-made. It is a result of responding to the call of Jesus. He “called to Him those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him” (*Mark 3:13, NKJV*). Although originally Jesus called the Twelve, He also called the Seventy (*Luke 10:1–20*) and then commanded His disciples to “‘make disciples of all the nations’ ” (*Matt. 28:19, NKJV*). Thus, discipleship is not restrictive: it is governed by the same “whosoever” principle that operates in God’s plan of salvation (*John 3:16*).

Whoever heeds His call, experiences His forgiveness, and commits himself or herself to Christ’s service is His disciple. Christian discipleship is an operative link between the saved and the Savior—the former to live, obey, relate, experience, and serve within the will of the latter. Thus, Paul could say, “‘I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’ ” (*Gal. 2:20, NIV*).

Discuss: The Great Commission (*Matt. 28:19*) requires that we make disciples of all nations. What areas of life are affected by the “all nation” concept? How would you relate to those areas?

II. Marks of Discipleship (*Review Luke 9:23 with your class.*)

At least four marks of discipleship must be emphasized.

First, the priority of Jesus. “‘If anyone desires to come after Me,’” said Jesus, “‘let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me’ ” (*Luke 9:23, NKJV*). All relationships, activities, hopes, and dreams

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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 an 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

must come under the lordship of Christ daily and perpetually. Nothing can come between the disciple and the Master (*Matt. 10:37–39*). A disciple’s ever-binding motto will be, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (*Phil. 1:21, NKJV*).

Second, abiding in Jesus. “ ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed’ ” (*John 8:31, 32, NKJV*). Christian discipleship is a call to continually live in Jesus and to let His Word be the constant guide to faith and conduct. Doctrinal faithfulness, lifelong obedience, and fearless witness to the Master will set a disciple apart from others.

Third, loving one another. “ ‘A new commandment I give to you. . . . By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:34, 35, NKJV*). In Jesus’ new commandment (*vs. 34*), the newness does not refer to love but to the object of love. We do love, but we love the lovable, our own. But Jesus expects His disciples to love as He did—love sacrificially, love at all costs, love without barriers, love inclusively, love to build the community, love to enlarge God’s kingdom, and love to make disciples.

Fourth, fruit-bearing. “ ‘By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples’ ” (*John 15:8, NKJV*). Far from being a theoretical construct, discipleship is a practical witness to what Christ has done to a sinner. He has forgiven, redeemed, and empowered so that the once feeble and guilt-ridden are freed from condemnation to live lives of obedience and ones that are fruit-bearing. Disciples are overcomers and reflectors of Christ’s righteousness.

Discuss: Read Acts 11:19–27. Preachers call this narrative the Antioch effect—the effect of grace that produced disciples out of both Jews and Gentiles and made a common family known for the first time as “Christians.” What lessons can you draw from this narrative?

► **STEP 3—Practice**

Just for Teachers: Discipleship involves a commitment (*Mark 8:34–36*). The commitment is total, lifelong, and costly. It involves our

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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 was truly a disciple 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

money, time, talents, and family. It may get in the way of our pride, self-sufficiency, and desires. What is your commitment readiness like?

Distribute slips of paper to your class. Ask each member to consider prayerfully areas in which their discipleship commitments need to be refined, and then list those areas. Let them place the list in their Bibles and review it during their private devotions.

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Share with the class the following story that imagines what transpired immediately upon Jesus' return to heaven. Then follow up with the discussion questions.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, jubilant angels welcomed the triumphant Conqueror with a rousing chorus of praise. Jesus told the angels of His victorious mission to earth and what it cost in terms of His suffering and death. Seeing the nailprints on His hands, angels were moved at the love that the Father and the Son showed toward sinners.

One angel may have asked Jesus, "After You have done so much for humanity, what plans have You left behind so that all the world will know about God's love and Your redemptive action?"

Jesus may have answered, "I have left Peter, James, John, and others and told them to go and make disciples of all men and women. My work on earth is done, but its completion rests with My disciples."

Discuss: How do we know that we are disciples of Jesus? What kind of disciples does Jesus wish us to be? How can we be the kind of disciples that Jesus can count on to tell others what He has done for them?

Heaven's costliest mission demands our faithfulness in discipleship. How can we commit to a deeper faithfulness as His disciples?

What work has Jesus left for us to finish in His name?

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:

- ❶ 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.
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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?
- ❹ 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.