

Discipleship Then *and* Now



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 24:14; 28:19, 20; Mark 16:20; John 3:21–30; Acts 5:34–39.*

Memory Text: “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (*Mark 16:20, NIV*).

Discipleship goes back to even before the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Several centuries before His coming into this world in human flesh, there were disciple-gathering teachers who influenced the lives of others with their instructions. This was true with the Greeks, the Jews, the Chinese, and other ancient cultures. Several of these teachers refused to accept the use of the term teacher in reference to themselves or that of *disciple* in reference to their pupils, so close was the bond between them.

This week's lesson explores discipleship in other settings, compares it with Jesus' discipleship, and examines the implications for the disciples of Jesus who live in the twenty-first century.

The Week at a Glance: What was discipleship like among the Greeks and the Jews? How was discipleship different with John the Baptist and with Jesus of Nazareth? What applications for the contemporary task of discipleship can we gain from discipleship in the time of Jesus?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 12.*

Discipleship Among the Greeks

“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’ ”(*John 12:20, 21, NRSV*).

The fact that these Greeks went to worship at the festival should tell us something about them already. Also, the verses beforehand reveal that so much was happening that the attitude of the Greeks should not be surprising.

Read the following texts. What insight could they shed upon what was happening here? *Jer. 29:13; John 1:9; 6:44; Acts 10:34, 35.*

Last week we saw that Jesus always chose His own disciples. The above texts might, at first glance, indicate something different. Yet, that is not the case. Even here the Spirit was wooing these Greeks.

In Greek culture, discipleship took many different forms. Though some Greek teachers would initiate the call to discipleship, the tradition was for the students to choose the teacher. The students, not the teacher, initiated the relationship. Also, it was common for the teachers to charge a fee for the students who studied with them.

In this case, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, these Greeks were seeking Jesus, to learn from Him. Given that God uses what we know to teach us what we need to know, this is a viable notion. Indeed, Ellen G. White notes that “the Greeks longed to know the truth in regard to His mission.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 622. She also said that Jesus granted their request.

If someone were to come up to you, as these Greeks did to Philip, and say, “We wish to see Jesus,” what would you answer? How would you introduce them to Him?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Mark 16:19, 20*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that Jesus confirmed His Word through His disciples with signs and wonders.

Feel: Cultivate a desire to work closely for, and with, Jesus.

Do: Make the places he or she goes each day a mission field.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus Confirms His Word

A Mark gives the sense that the action of the disciples in 16:20 is a direct and immediate response to what happened with Jesus in verse 19. What was that? What does their response teach us about our own response to Jesus' Word?

B What does the fact the disciples preached "everywhere" reveal about the gospel's scope?

C How are we to understand Mark's words that the Lord "confirmed His word by signs that accompanied it"? What kind of miracles might this include? Why were signs important?

II. Feel: His Word in Us

A Does Jesus perform wonders in our lives? Explain. What are the signs and miracles we see? How do we define them?

B What "words" or truth might Jesus wish to confirm in us? How else might Jesus do that besides signs and miracles?

III. Do: Working With Jesus

A Discipleship to Jesus and other figures of His time often include telling others about wonders performed by one's master. How can we, as disciples of Jesus, do the same?

B The disciples preached "everywhere." How can your home, school, or job be a mission field?

▶ **Summary:** As Jesus' disciples, we can draw lessons from the lives of His early disciples.

Discipleship Among the Jews

Pupil-teacher relations are mentioned in the writings of Jewish scholars, such as Philo and Josephus. There were also two famed rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, who had rival schools in Jerusalem and who attracted followers. We also are told in Acts that Saul of Tarsus was the pupil of Rabbi Gamaliel, another famed first-century Jewish teacher (*Acts 5:34–39, 22:3*).

Read the above texts. What can we learn about Gamaliel from them?

These teachers were reputed throughout the first century among the Jews. They attracted pupils from the whole world to Jerusalem, the center of theological and juridical knowledge of Judaism, to sit at the feet of these masters. A young Jew who desired to become a rabbi began his education as a pupil at a very early age, perhaps as early as fourteen. He was in personal contact with his teacher, listening to his instructions, imitating his gestures, and learning from him in the classroom and in daily life. In the classroom, he assumed the posture of a learner, sitting at his master's feet. When he mastered the traditional material, he was designated a nonordained scholar. Ordination came later at a prefixed age. At that time, the title rabbi was bestowed upon him, as well as the power to bind or loose for all time the Jews of the entire world.

What we have seen in the preceding paragraphs is consistent with the glimpses of Jewish teacher-pupil relations we get from the New Testament. What light do they shed on the understanding of the following passages? *Matt. 16:19, 18:18*.

Have you known a teacher you have admired, who made a great impact on your life for good? What were the aspects of that teacher that so impressed you? In what ways can you emulate those traits in your own life?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Key Concept: Jesus expects the same commitment to the task of discipleship from us as He did from the early disciples.

What debt do the living owe the dead? How does their legacy shape the tasks we are called to do? Questions like these haunted one man on a train ride to a place where the dead outnumbered the living.

The body count was not in the hundreds but the thousands. Seventy-five hundred dead, and that was just the toll in human corpses. Several thousand dead horses added to the smell, making it almost suicide to breathe. A burial site was quickly chosen, and two dignitaries of state were called to speak. The first speaker delivered a two-hour-long eulogy. The second speaker, the man from the train, was to dedicate the burial ground to those who had fought there. He was more of a “ribbon cutter” at a land breaking ceremony—his part in the dedication secondary and trivial. When he rose to speak, the audience fanned themselves in the sweltering heat and braced for another long oratory. His speech was over, it seemed, before it started. But then again, you don’t need two hours to speak less than three hundred words. Those same words predicted “no one will remember what we say here.” While this was certainly true of Edward Everett’s speech, this is not true of Abraham Lincoln’s. His humble speech, which would go down as one of the greatest in U.S. history, closed with these words:

“It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. . . .”

Consider This: Abraham Lincoln spoke of the dedication “to the great task” before them. Just as the early disciples had a task, Jesus calls us to dedicate ourselves to the tasks of discipleship before us. What are those tasks? How do we carry forward the work they began?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Bible Commentary

I. “‘We Would See Jesus’” (Review John 12:20–26 with your class.)

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Discipleship With John the Baptist

Read John 3:21–30. Explain what this passage says about John the Baptist in relationship to discipleship. Was he also a disciple-gathering teacher? Because he did not have rabbinical education, what does the title *rabbi* say about the regard his pupils had for him?

It is apparent that some Jews wondered whether John the Baptist was the Messiah. This is implied by the questions of the messengers whom the priests and Levites from Jerusalem sent to John the Baptist (*John 1:19–28*). Their questions are significant, especially when one considers that a two-messiah concept had developed among the Jews during this period between the Old and New Testaments. It anticipated a priestly messiah from the tribe of Levi and a kingly messiah from the tribe of Judah. The fact that priests and Levites were sent is therefore notable since they belonged to the tribe of Levi.

It is possible that the disciples of John saw him as a priestly messiah; after all, he was from the tribe of Levi. This belief could also have motivated the Jerusalem visitors, who inquired of John regarding his mission. Some scholars believe that this was the reason the author of the fourth Gospel recorded so much of what the Baptist said about Jesus. He wanted it to be absolutely clear that John the Baptist saw Jesus, not himself, as the Messiah. Perhaps it is against this background that we must understand John 3:25, 26.

What was the issue that caused some distress among John's disciples? See John 3:21–30. What does their attitude say about them? In contrast, what does John's response tell us about his character? What principle can we learn from John's response that we could apply to our own lives?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Just who were the Greeks who asked Philip to see Jesus? We don't know their names, professions, or whether they lived in Jerusalem or had sailed from Athens or Ephesus. But we can consider the backdrop of the scene in which they came seeking Jesus and it can help us understand what they wanted.

It was Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus had just made a very public and kingly entrance on a colt into the city through streets littered with palm fronds and coats. His entrance excited fears and ambitions. Alarmed at Jesus' growing influence, the Pharisees put out word that if anyone knew where Jesus was they should kindly let them know. Six days before this, Jesus sat at supper with Lazarus, back from the dead, whom the Pharisees plotted to snuff out to quiet the hooplah about Jesus. Meanwhile, Jews streamed into the city to purify themselves for the feast. Some were curious about Lazarus and wanted an eyeful of the One who made the dead walk. Many hoped Jesus' entrance into the city was a sign He would take David's throne from Herod and incite a revolt against Rome. Into this hotbed of intrigue, gossip, and near bloodshed entered the Greeks.

We don't know how many there were. But we do know that they did not come to gawk. They were seeking Jesus, and the Spirit of God drew them. Hundreds of years before, another Greek, Herodotus, had wandered the earth seeking for truth and to find things out. In this tradition of questing for knowledge, these men wanted to "see" or behold Jesus. And from Jesus' response we can deduce that they wanted to understand His purpose. But Jesus tells them the strangest thing. If they want to serve Him, *they must fall like grain into the ground and die?*

Consider This: Imagine traveling from afar to hear a great teacher, who tells you that the answer to life is death. What did Jesus mean by the words in John 12:24? How does Lazarus's death help us understand what this illustration means? What does this say to us today as disciples about our commitment to Jesus? What is He asking us to do?

II. Water Into Wine *(Review with your class John 1:35–40.)*

Jesus involved His disciples in every aspect of His ministry. When He sent them out to preach and teach, they did so with confidence because of what they had seen Him do, starting with His first miracle at Cana.

So they would have heard Jesus' mother turn to tell Him there was no wine. They saw her tell the servants to do as her Son instructed. They must have watched with curiosity as Jesus told the servants to fill the six water pots with water and then with growing amazement as Jesus

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Discipleship With Jesus

From the very outset of His public ministry, Jesus had disciples. He appeared on the first-century Jewish scene as a disciple-gathering teacher in the tradition of both Greek and Jewish teachers. There were also points of contact with John the Baptist since John baptized Him in preparation for His mission.

As in both Jewish and Greek traditions, Jesus had disciples who followed Him everywhere, who listened to His teaching, and who imitated Him (*Matt. 5:1, 2; John 1:35–40; 2:1, 2*).

Carefully read Matthew 4:18–20; then (going back over Sunday’s and Monday’s lessons) compare the ways in which one came to be a disciple of Jesus, of the Greek teachers, and of the established rabbis. What things did they have in common? What things were different?

“Until this time none of the disciples had fully united as collaborators with Jesus. They had witnessed many of His miracles, and had listened to His teaching; but they had not entirely forsaken their former employment. The imprisonment of John the Baptist had been to them all a bitter disappointment. If such were to be the outcome of John’s mission, they could have little hope for their Master, with all the religious leaders combined against Him. Under the circumstances it was a relief to them to return for a short time to their fishing. But now Jesus called them to forsake their former life, and unite their interests with His. Peter had accepted the call. Upon reaching the shore, Jesus bade the three other disciples, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left all, and followed Him [*Matt. 4:19, 20*].”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 246–249.

What has Jesus called you to give up in order to follow Him? What has your response to that call been? Might you still be holding on to something that is standing in the way of a full commitment to the Lord?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

told them to take the water pots to the one in charge of the feast. With what astonishment they must have listened as the steward declared that this *wine* tasted better than the first batch. The disciples must have then looked back with wonder at Jesus. They had seen what had gone into those pots. They knew it was only water.

Consider This: What does Jesus' effort to take time to attend a wedding say to us about how the social activities of life can be part of our mission to serve Him? Why is it significant that this is Jesus' first miracle? In exchange for our commitment to Him, what does this story promise that Christ commits to us as His disciples?

► STEP 3—Practice!

Thought Questions:

- 1 What does Jesus mean by “ask anything in my name” and it shall be done “according to your faith” in John 14:13, 14 and Matthew 9:29? What is this promising us? For what purpose? What is this *not* promising us?
- 2 What does the gospel commission in Matthew 28:19, 20 show us Jesus expects us to do today? In light of these texts, how can we commit to these tasks as disciples of Jesus? How is He calling us in our sphere to serve Him? How can these texts help us to know His will in our lives as His disciples and follow Him?

Application Questions:

- 1 Sunday's study makes the statement: “God uses what we know to teach us what we need to know.” Ask your students to share how God has done this for them. What did they learn? What did He use to teach them?
- 2 In turning the water into wine Jesus had a deeper purpose: to give His disciples a lesson in faith. What does this first miracle at Cana show about Jesus' teaching methods? How did He grab His disciples' attention? How did He convince their hearts? How can we use these methods to reach others?

Witnessing

Chances are as a child you went out on summer evenings with an empty jar to catch fireflies. Fireflies are very romantic beasts. They spend their whole adult lives courting. But then again, if you are a firefly your whole

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Contemporary Discipleship

“Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (*Mark 16:20, NIV*).

According to the above verse, what was one major characteristic seen in the disciples of Christ? What message is there for us, as well? *See also Matt. 24:14; 28:19, 20; Rev. 14:6–12.*

Beside the fact that the disciples were preaching everywhere, Mark said that the Lord worked with the early disciples after His departure and *confirmed His word* among them by the signs that accompanied it. Are contemporary disciples seeing God’s confirmation of His word among them through signs and miracles? What are some of the signs and miracles we see? How do we define signs and miracles? Should we expect the same kind of signs and miracles in every culture, time, and society?

Are there other ways, besides signs and miracles, for God to *confirm His word* among us? If so, how?

Jesus has no less expectation of His disciples today than He had for the early ones. He requires the same commitment to the task from us. However, He says, “According to your faith be it unto you” (*Matt. 9:29*). Moreover, He says, “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (*John 14:13, 14, NIV*).

How involved are you in the work of spreading the gospel? What are your own spiritual gifts, and how can they be used in this work? When was the last time you did anything at all in terms of helping others know the wonderful truths that you have been entrusted with? What does your answer tell you about yourself?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

adult life span consists of only one or two weeks. That doesn't leave much spare time for anything but courtship if the species is to survive.

To attract a female, the male firefly flashes his belly on and off. Female fireflies are for the most part wingless. The male uses his luminescence to signal in intricate flashing patterns to a female on the ground. With over two hundred kinds of fireflies, the flashing patterns help fireflies find their own kind. Once a match is found, the male lands near the female to consummate the match. The female then deposits her fertilized eggs underground. After three weeks, they hatch and come out of the ground for one or two years, until they grow into pupa and then into the fireflies seen on summer nights.

Consider This: We are unable to come to Jesus as the wingless fireflies on the ground are unable to fly. When the Greek seekers went looking for Jesus, they had to wait for Jesus to come to them. But Jesus, the Light of the world, drew the Greeks to Him with His Spirit. How is our seeking Him a response to His first seeking us?

■ *Jesus says that if we would serve Him we must first fall into the ground like grain and die. The fireflies, too, illustrate this truth by burying their eggs. Only after being hidden can they emerge, becoming what they were meant to be. As disciples, why must self be hidden in Christ for us to become His disciples?*

► STEP 4—Apply!

Discuss ways your class members can deepen their commitment to the task of discipleship. Use the following activities to help meet this goal:

1 Jesus used the grain to show the idea that a true disciple must die to self to live for Him. Think of examples from nature or from your culture that illustrate this idea. How can you share them with others?

2 Remember the wedding feast at Cana. Find someone who has empty “water jars” to fill. Maybe you know carpentry or plumbing and know someone who needs a bathroom fixed but can't afford to hire someone. Or maybe you're good with numbers and can tutor someone in math. How can you use this opportunity to meet both temporal and spiritual needs?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 432, 433, 582–585, 932, 1022, 1023; Ellen G. White, “Who Is the Greatest?” p. 432, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“For a time the Baptist’s influence over the nation had been greater than that of its rulers, priests, or princes. If he had announced himself as the Messiah, and raised a revolt against Rome, priests and people would have flocked to his standard. Every consideration that appeals to the ambition of the world’s conquerors Satan had stood ready to urge upon John the Baptist. But with the evidence before him of his power, he had steadfastly refused the splendid bribe. The attention which was fixed upon him he had directed to Another. Now he saw the tide of popularity turning away from himself to the Saviour. Day by day the crowds about him lessened. . . . But the disciples of John looked with jealousy upon the growing popularity of Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 178.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is involved in leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus? What are the different ways such a commitment is made manifest in our lives? In class on Sabbath, be prepared to talk about your own understanding of what this means.
- 2 What roles should our educational institutions have in helping make disciples? How can our churches and our schools better work together in this important challenge?
- 3 Even in the time of Jesus there was a rivalry among disciples. Why is something like this so common, even among a work that is, ideally, so exalted, a work that should by its very nature keep us all humble and eager for the success of others? What practical things can we do to keep ourselves from falling into this trap?
- 4 What about this whole question of signs and wonders and miracles? Do we believe in this? If so, what do we believe about it? What do signs and wonders prove? What do they not prove? Why should we always approach these things with caution, humility, and firm reliance on the Word of God?