

What is Discipleship?

The answer to this question is very important for the health of the body of **Christ**. Unfortunately, there have been many theories or methods of discipleship that have clouded the practice of discipleship. Actually, by getting back to the original pattern set forth by **Jesus**, it would bring the Body of Christ back to a healthy status.

To understand discipleship as practiced by **Jesus**, we need to understand the culture of that day. Learning the ways of the **LORD** was the primary directive of the Torah as described in Deuteronomy 6:1-9 NLT, emphasis added is mine:

*These are the commands, decrees, and regulations that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you. You must obey them in the land you are about to enter and occupy, and you and your children and grandchildren must fear the LORD your God as long as you live. If you obey all His decrees and commands, you will enjoy a long life. Listen closely, Israel, **and be careful to obey**. Then all will go well with you, and you will have many children in the land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. "Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. **And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates***

In honor of this command, the Jewish people would start teaching their children the Torah (instructions) at age six. By age 10, many of them would have memorized most if not the entire Torah. The need for this memorization was found in the scarcity of the Torah scrolls. A small village might have only one scroll for the community to use. The more talented students would move on to learn the Talmud (learning). Here the student would learn of the rest of the Scriptures, the Oral Traditions and commentaries regarding the Torah instructions. This form of education would continue until about age fourteen when the best of the best would seek discipleship with a Rabbi.

The discipleship process was a total commitment to learning the ways of the Rabbi. They would spend the entire day and night being around the Rabbi, seeing how he would handle various situations based on his understanding of the Torah instructions. The Rabbi would use objects from everyday life to explain the truths from the Scriptures and he would question the students regarding their previous training to better develop their understanding of the Torah.

The goal of the disciple was to be just like the Rabbi in their manner of spiritual expression. This goal would require a character on the part of the teacher that would model the characteristics of the **LORD** in their lives. While each Rabbi would have a different interpretation of the Torah instructions and would thus, maintain different rules, nevertheless, they would all have the same dedication to the basic character of the Torah instructions. The basic character of the Torah was to completely love the **LORD** and to love their neighbors as they would love themselves, Matthew 22:37-40 NLT, emphasis added is mine:

*Jesus replied, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' **The entire law (Torah) and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.**"*

In other words, it was customary for the Jewish people to follow different teachings or guidelines for righteous living but yet still exhibit the same level of devotion to the things of the **LORD** as a corporate community. It was for this very purpose that **Jesus** came to the Earth to provide a living demonstration of how the Torah was to be interpreted correctly in accordance with the spirit of the Torah instructions. The instructions that **Jesus** offered was of a divine authority. We, as mere mortals, will be forced to follow human teachers that may not have the complete understanding of their divine authority that **Jesus** had. Nevertheless, the **Holy Spirit** can provide us with understanding of the divine authority that may be lacking in our human teachers. It is important to understand that we are not now to follow the man instituted interpretations because these are often tainted with human agenda's, but rather we are required now to submit to the divine character of our teachers as they exhibit the righteousness of the **LORD** in their lives and that are submitted to the direction of the **Holy Spirit**. It is to their righteousness as presented in the Torah instructions that our submission is required and not to their charisma or intellect.

Jesus came to present many examples of how a teacher should look and act. One example is found in the following reference, Matthew 6:22, 23 NLT:

Your eye is a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is good, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is bad, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!

The phrase 'eye is good' or in some translations 'eye is single,' means that a person has a generous spirit. They are willing to share of their emotions, their finances, and their life. This is the type of character that a teacher is to show from their life as an example for the disciples. The phrase 'evil eye' or in some translations 'eye is bad,' means that the person has a miserly spirit. This type of spirit does not portray the character of the **Father** as revealed in the Torah instructions. So the character that a teacher must manifest is that of the generous and loving character of the **Father**.

Showing forth the characteristics of the **Father** is the vital element of being a teacher. In our Western viewpoint, a teacher can be one that has acquired knowledge on a subject but they have not necessarily experienced the application of that knowledge. Under the Hebraic system, the teacher was one that had knowledge based on personal experience with the ways of **GOD**. His life was a walking billboard, if you will, of how the **LORD** had dealt with him in his walk of faith. The lack of personal experience in spiritual maturity is a major problem in our efforts to promote discipleship. We seem to think we can pass on information from a book, program, or curriculum; and that these efforts will have life changing potential. It just doesn't work this way.

People will accept these principles from those that have used the principles for themselves. A person might have some interest in reading a book by someone that tells them the theoretical means to make a million dollars but most people will prefer to read a book by someone that has actually put the theories to work to make their million. The same holds true for spiritual matters. The reason that **Jesus** was so successful in His ministry was that He walked by the truths that He shared. People want to see people that are genuine in their walk.

The issue of genuineness does raise an interesting question regarding our personal experiences with the discipleship process and that question is – Do we need to be 'perfect' in order to disciple others? The answer is a resounding no, for no one is perfect in their walk of faith. We are being perfected in the process of our spiritual maturity. Besides, being 'perfect' could be discouraging for people that do not feel very 'perfect' and it might make it difficult for them to relate to a 'perfect' person. What people really want is 'real' people facing 'real' situations to model an approach that is consistent with the characteristics of the **Father**. This means that we might not handle a situation perfectly at first but through persistence we can handle the situation better. It gives others a hope that though they are not 'perfect', they can grow and become more like our **Father** in time.

I really would like us to grasp the basic concept that being a disciple or to disciple someone else is about sharing life experiences. It is rather difficult under our Western mode of spiritual life to meet on Sunday and maybe during the week in small group and effectively be able to disciple anyone. It takes a quantity of time to develop as a disciple or to disciple someone. There needs to be a host of experiences that will allow the

disciple to see the spiritual principles, that are being taught, modeled before their eyes. And just like there are no 'perfect' parents, there are no 'perfect' people that choose to disciple others. We are all growing in the things of the Kingdom of God but we are all at different stages of development or understanding.

Thus, the very essence of discipleship is taking a person under our wing to devote a sufficient quantity of time with them, in order for them to see all your 'warts' and to be able to see you struggle a little, while you figure it out. It is the watching of your struggles, in your questioning of the Scriptures, in your struggles with relationships, in watching your submission to the will of the **Father**; that they will be able to witness genuine faith in action. It is a matter of saying that "here is where I am at. Come along and I can show you how the **Father** got me here." We are responsible to pass on what **GOD** has done for us to this point and then perhaps, we need let other believers complete the process of discipleship with their experiences. It is in this manner that the whole body of **Christ** participates in the discipleship process. We do not have to be responsible to grow them all the way to spiritual maturity, it may happen that way, but it is more important to be willing to let the **LORD** direct the discipleship. You may only have to take them a few steps along the journey before **GOD** will direct another obedient servant to take over, but for whatever the length of the discipleship period, you must be committed to your disciple and to giving them the time that they need to grow.

Being a person who discipled others will expose your inner being to others. It will expose your weakness and points of failure but it also will allow the **Father** to manifest His strength through your vulnerabilities. It means being humble and teachable. It is difficult to teach others what you have not learned. So you must be willing to allow **GOD** to teach you and train you, so that you will have life experiences to share with others.

It is also important to realize that you cannot disciple anyone by your own efforts and achieve spiritual maturity for them. You must be guided every step of the way by the work of the **Holy Spirit**. Each person that you disciple will have different needs but there will be basic concepts that will help everyone to grow into the image of **Jesus**. Some helpful steps are as follows:

- 🕯 **Sharing Knowledge:** It is important for the disciple to understand the basics of the plan of **GOD** to bring salvation to the people of the world. The basics would include an understanding of **Father's** plan of restoration, the part that the ministry that **Jesus** plays in this plan, and how **GOD** will fulfill the Kingdom mission for the ages.
- 🕯 **Answering Questions:** The disciple will have many questions that you will not be able to answer. Some of these questions may be beyond their level of

understanding at this time. Other questions may regard topics that are difficult to explain. We have included a basic set of twenty one teachings that will offer assistance to the person mentoring the disciple in their quest to provide answers to these questions. Some questions will take long periods of discussion and research in order to answer. Don't resist this part of the process for it is important for the disciple to understand that they will not know all the answers either but they can witness a process that will engage the **Holy Spirit** in seeking the answers.

- ✠ **Sharing life experiences:** A lot can be learned by sharing the experiences of life that have meaning to the disciple so that they can learn how others have dealt with these very situations. Since no one ever deals with them 'perfectly' it would be helpful to discuss what worked and what did not work so that the disciple can examine the various options to see what would be meaningful to them. This is a practice that will make one vulnerable but it is also a practice that will bring much glory to the **Father**.

- ✠ **Doing things together:** Making the disciple an active part of your life is very important. **Jesus** spent many hours traveling with His disciples that would afford numerous opportunities to express eternal spiritual truths in the everyday activities of life. What these activities would be comprised of would be up to you but they should consist of many common experiences and not just 'big' activities. They could include work activities, spiritual activities, recreational activities, family time activities, etc.

- ✠ **Praying for and with your disciple:** Many hours are needed to be spent before our **Father** in prayers for the people that we are endeavoring to disciple. In is during this time spent in specific prayer for them that our hearts will be changed for them and we will receive valuable guidance for them. We should pray over them on any appropriate occasion. It is helpful to impart a measure of our spiritual maturity to them as we minister to them in the intimate context of prayer.

- ✠ **Encourage your disciple:** Part of our spiritual growth that occurs at the hand of our heavenly **Father** is that He tends to bless us when we get it right. Do not hesitate to correct your disciple if they get it wrong, for even **Jesus** had some words to say to His disciples in such occasions (o ye of little faith). But then be quick to encourage their efforts, even when the progress is slow. Remember that the **LORD** has a specific plan for them and it is our responsibility to be in cooperation for that plan. We can sometimes get impatient but such impatience will only hinder the progress. We need to be committed to the desired results despite the length of time that may be needed to complete the project.

- ☞ **Be flexible with your approach to doctrine:** The goal of discipleship is to make us and then them, into the image of **Jesus**. It is tempting sometimes to try to instill pet doctrines and beliefs into our disciples but the basic need of the disciple is to know what to do rather than what doctrines to believe. It is important for the disciple to understand the basic tenets of the faith, these things being expressed in Hebrews 6:1-3 NLT: *So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding.* They may have to struggle with these 'milk' oriented teaching before they are capable of understanding the more 'meat' oriented teachings that deal with more mature themes. Give them time to grow into the more mature ways of the **Father**.
- ☞ **Model obedience to the ways of GOD:** It is very important to not just teach the right things to do but we must be willing to walk in them ourselves. The old adage that you should 'do as I say and not as I do' is certainly not appropriate here. Obedience to the LORD is a great privilege and it should be modeled as a joyful activity and not as a dire duty. Since many of our blessings are contingent on obedience, it is most beneficial for our disciples to see the blessings that we receive as our walk is obedient to the will of **GOD**, which was expressed in the Torah instructions, elaborated on by **Jesus**, and is taught to us by the Holy Spirit.
- ☞ **Model the servant's heart:** It is most important to understand that it is not so much a matter of what we do as it is the reason that we do it. We can do the right things but for the wrong motive and it will do no good. Conversely we may struggle in the doing of the right things but if our hearts are committed to doing right, then the issue of performance becomes secondary to the proper attitude of the heart.

Lastly, we need to bear in mind the model of discipleship that Paul set forth in his famous five fold ministry example given in Ephesians 4:11-16 NLT. It does not matter what our specific giftings are, as much as it is the attitude of helping other believers into maturity and doing it in a sense of community, which will form the full stature of **Jesus**, emphasis added is mine:

*Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that **we will***

be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of His body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

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