

Being Jesus' Disciple

The word for "disciple" in the Greek is "μαθητής." The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology indicates this word, as a noun, is used only in the Gospels and Acts. As a verb, the word means "to learn, to conform to." Therefore, a disciple was a learner and follower – one who adheres to someone's teaching or instruction (see, Mt. 5:1). In fact, it was a common first century designation given for students. We find that there were disciples of John the Baptist (Mt. 11:2), disciples of the Pharisees (Lk. 5:33), and disciples of Moses (Jn. 9:28).

Accordingly, what does a disciple of Jesus look like? What are some characteristics of Jesus' disciples? First and most importantly, a true disciple of Jesus is one who believes the good news of the gospel (Acts 14:21). This involves believing Jesus for who he is (Jn. 1:41, 45, 49; 6:69). Second, being a disciple means the devotion of our entire lives for our entire life. Jesus urges us to count the costs before becoming his disciple (Lk. 14:25-33), as well as all throughout our journey here on earth (Lk. 9:23).

Of course, not everyone who calls themselves a disciple of Jesus is truly a disciple (Jn. 6:66). One can be closely associated with Jesus without becoming a true disciple of his (for example, Judas Iscariot). This makes sense when we consider that being a disciple is not entirely voluntary. One must first be called by Jesus to become a disciple of his (Mk. 1:17-20; 19:26; Jn. 6:70; 15:16).

Third, being a disciple in the early Church involved sacrificial service to others (Mt. 14:19-20; Jn. 13:14-17; Acts 6:2-3). Fourth, Jesus' disciples are part of an obedient community (Mt. 12:49-50; Acts 6:7). Just as marriage is a genuine expression of love, so too is obedience a genuine expression of discipleship. And, fifth, disciples of Jesus share in the privilege of duplicating themselves (Mt. 28:19-20). Jesus commands his first disciples to continue the work he began in them.

Being a disciple of Jesus is not merely gaining knowledge, but integrating what is learned into our lives. We want not only to be informed of our Master's life, but transformed by his life as well. Jesus says that a "student" (μαθητής) will not only learn from his teacher, but will be "like his teacher" (Lk. 6:40). This principle of being changed by what we learn comes out loud and clear in Phil. 4:9 where Paul encourages the Philippian believers to take what they have "learned" from him and "put it into practice." How exciting to know that we are pupils of the living God who personally trains us to be like him!