

# CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	X
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## **The Significance of Discipleship**

1: The Basis for Discipleship . . . . .	X
2: Criteria for Discipleship . . . . .	X

## **Purposeful Preparation**

3: The Pursuit of Personal Holiness . . . . .	X
4: The Bible: God's Discipleship Manual . . . . .	X
5: The Significance of Abiding . . . . .	X
6: Recognizing Opportunities . . . . .	X
7: Being Relational . . . . .	X
8: Sharing the Gospel . . . . .	X
9: Results of Salvation . . . . .	X

## **The Process of a Growing Disciple**

10: Promoting Spiritual Growth . . . . .	X
11: Teachability . . . . .	X
12: A Call to Surrender . . . . .	X
13: Sanctification . . . . .	X
14: The Significance of Faith . . . . .	X

## **The Process of Applying Truth**

15: The Significance of Applying Truth . . . . .	X
16: The Power Source . . . . .	X
17: How to Study the Bible for Application . . . . .	X
18: Applying Truth to Develop Identity in Christ . . . . .	X
19: Applying Truth to Fulfill God's Purpose . . . . .	X
20: Applying Truth to Correct Sin and Prevent Future Disobedience . . . . .	X
21: Applying Truth in Choices and Consequences . . . . .	X
22: Applying Truth in Relationships . . . . .	X
23: Applying Truth in Adversity . . . . .	X
24: Learning from Experience . . . . .	X

## **Purposeful Mentoring**

25: Recognizing and Seizing Godly Appointments . . . . .	X
26: Plan to Succeed . . . . .	X
27: The Process of Mentoring . . . . .	X

Appendix . . . . .	X
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# The Basis for Discipleship



To put it simply, a disciple of Jesus is someone who chooses to believe in, learn from, and follow Him. Discipleship is a process by which believers are taught biblical principles and how to apply them in practical ways. The idea of making disciples is found in the Bible, the Word of God.

In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus gave instructions to His followers. Many people now refer to these instructions as the Great Commission: *then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Up until this point in His ministry, Jesus’ twelve disciples had stayed near Him both in physical proximity and relationship. They had followed Jesus closely, learning from His example.

At this time, Jesus was sending them out to share with others the truth He had so fervently instilled in them. It would not be long before the disciples would receive the indwelling Holy Spirit, which would supernaturally empower them to do all the things Jesus had asked of them. Through this abiding relationship of His Spirit, Christ would always be with them. How amazing it is to realize that today we, too, have the truth of Christ Jesus and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit available to us. Therefore, we also have the potential to successfully make disciples of others.

So, how does one convert potential into actuality? Think about this: when a person is considered for employment, two things are consistently brought into question—education and experience. These components are important in tandem because a person who has knowledge, coupled with application, proves to be most efficient and effective in their area of service. The same is true for those serving in the kingdom of God. God gave us the Bible so we can gain knowledge of His instructions. He also provided, through His Son Jesus, a living example of the way His truth is to be successfully applied in our daily lives. In addition, God gives us the indwelling Holy Spirit, empowering us in every way to accomplish His will.

As we continually rely on the knowledge of God's Word and the power of His Spirit, our habits will develop into a lifestyle that mirrors Jesus. This lifestyle, or pattern, of walking according to the truth of God's Word represents a personal path of righteousness. Through the experience of walking righteously, we can then lead others to do the same.

As a result of the personal application of these truths, the apostle Paul became an excellent example of a genuine disciple of Jesus, his words matching his lifestyle and his lifestyle matching the truth of God's Word. Then he made disciples of others by developing in them

this same pattern of living. In 1 Corinthians 4:16–17 Paul wrote, *Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*

Paul understood that he could only lead others as well as he was personally following Jesus. Because of his faithful obedience to Jesus, Paul could ask others to imitate him. In doing so, he was asking them to focus on Christ's transforming work in his life. Timothy's spiritual maturity was a result of the work of the Lord and also demonstrated the example and instruction of Paul. As with Paul, we, too, must become genuine imitators of Christ in order to effectively influence others to follow Jesus.

As we progress in becoming faithful followers of Jesus, God will provide opportunities to influence others for His kingdom. It is during these occasions that our quality of preparation will be revealed. Just as we prepare for a career by gaining knowledge and training to be more qualified, we must gain knowledge of God's Word and be experienced in its application in order to more effectively influence others for Christ.

In considering ways to intentionally and purposefully prepare to disciple others, you may find it beneficial to first examine this entire book for practical application of biblical principles. Remember, the best way to develop genuine discipleship in others is to become a living example of Christlikeness for them to follow. For this reason, it is essential to first apply truth in your own life before asserting its use in the lives of others. There may be times throughout this book when you are presented with truths that you're already applying in your life. Rather than skim over these sections, praise God for the work He is accomplishing in you. Then, ask the Lord to reveal any

additional lessons He desires for you to glean from each specific principle.

When you encounter biblical truths that are new to you or are currently absent in your life, ask God to enable you to grasp all He desires for you to learn from each precept. Keep in mind that your goal is not to complete this book in a set timeframe, but to establish, practice, and thereby develop as a lifestyle everything God would have you apply from His Word. This means that there may be times when you need to camp on a particular subject to allow God to fully teach you from His Word, and then practically employ it before moving on to another subject. As you allow God to make His truth real and to apply it personally, the pages of Scripture will become alive and useful in your daily life.

Be aware that there may be times in this book when the discussion of a biblical principle may seem repetitive. However, many subjects will be initially covered to consider their importance in personal discipleship, and then later to show application and significance when training others. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal Himself to you as you read Scripture and then help you implement each biblical principle that is presented. In doing so, you will become a living example of Christ for others to follow, enabling you to disciple them as God commands.

# Criteria for Discipleship



The countless denominations representing the Christian faith and the many different people attending these churches can create confusion for those trying to distinguish a genuine disciple of Jesus. Since discipleship originated with God, it makes sense to rely on His Word, rather than man's word, to define a true disciple. Therefore, in order to identify a present-day disciple of Jesus, we should look at the disciples of Jesus' day. In doing so, we choose to lay down our own perceptions of what a disciple may look like to embrace the criteria used in the Bible.

For example, in the New Testament Jesus personally invited, or called, His disciples. Matthew 9:9 tells us, *As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.* In Mark 1:17–18 Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee when He extended an invitation to Simon and his brother Andrew: *"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Just as in biblical times, Jesus still calls people today to follow Him and, in every case, Jesus' invitation to become a disciple requires a response. These verses demonstrate that the response is to be an immediate action of obedience rather than merely verbal assent. Notice that the invitation is "to follow." Jesus never asks us to run ahead of Him or to pursue anything apart from Him. Christ Jesus asks us to follow Him because He knows best how to lead and the direction He wants us to go.

Have you acknowledged and accepted the call from Jesus to follow Him? Have you embraced Christ as your personal Lord by abandoning your own desires to follow His lead, allowing Him to rule in your heart and life? In addition to personal discipleship, Jesus has a greater purpose for His call on our lives—to make us "fishers of men" who effectively convey the truth of Christ to others. Are you willing to allow Jesus to train you to become an effective "fisher of men"?

Similar to other invitations, Scripture teaches that accepting the invitation to become a disciple of Jesus has stipulations. This means that God not only desires certain things from His followers but also has requirements. God asks us to follow His requirements, so that we may experience life's benefits to the fullest, not as a means to control our lives. The things God asks of us may not be easy, but they are necessary for spiritual success. A believer doesn't fully or completely meet Christ's requirements when he initially becomes a disciple of Jesus. Following Jesus is a moment by moment, day-by-day process of growing in obedience. As we mature in obedience, our lives are transformed to reflect Christ. As a result, God is honored and we reap the benefits (Romans 6:22).

Anyone may call himself a disciple. Some people today are led to believe that followers of Jesus are developed through church

attendance, financial giving, and volunteering to help those in need. Although these are good and may be a product of discipleship, the ultimate goal of discipleship is to become more like Christ Jesus. Therefore, the choice to follow and the manner in which we follow are of extreme significance. In other words, personal discipleship is a deliberate choice that must be Christ-led and Christ-centered to produce the desired outcome of genuine transformation.

The question then becomes this: Can we learn what the process of discipleship should look like and are we committed to the process? The answer to the first part of this question is yes. The Bible

clearly shows us what the process of discipleship looks like, and God equips every believer with the Holy Spirit to enable him or her to successfully follow the Holy Spirit's lead. (This will be explained in practical detail in this book.) The second part of the question must be answered by each individual. Are you committed to the process of discipleship?

Discipleship is indeed a lifelong process. However, each step of the process should reflect actions based on biblical truth that will result in a consistent progression toward spiritual maturity. You may want to remember it this way: commitment to the process will produce consistent progress. In the fourth chapter of 1 Timothy, Paul spoke about the devotion and diligence necessary for the process of discipleship. In verse 15 he wrote, *Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Your spiritual progress is a testimony to God's transforming work in your life!*

It may be helpful at this point to examine a stipulation for discipleship presented in the Bible and what the transformation process might look like. In Luke 9:23 Jesus said, *"If anyone would come after me, he*



*must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*” (The word *if* often identifies stipulations in the Bible.) In this case, Jesus is explaining what is required of those who would consider following Him.

To truly follow Jesus is not a one-time commitment but a daily resolve to deny oneself for the sake of Christ. In doing so, we consistently put aside personal desires to embrace those things that are most pleasing to God. Just as Jesus became a living example of one who followed God the Father in total commitment, even unto death (Philippians 2:5–8), we, too, are to show the same humble and obedient devotion to our Lord.

As you know, denying self will not come naturally—it will take deliberate intent. Denying self means that you place Jesus and others as a priority over self, being careful to keep the things of this world from coming between you and your relationship with Christ. This may mean that God prompts you to turn off the television to spend more time studying His Word or in prayer for others. The Lord may ask you to give up some personal comfort to serve those in need. Following Jesus may cause you to miss a family dinner because He leads you to share His plan of salvation with a co-worker after work.

As a person consistently chooses to deny himself for the purpose of furthering Christ’s kingdom, his life is transformed, increasingly looking more like the perfect servant, Jesus (Mark 10:45). This consistent transformation is spiritually maturing, or progressing in the process of growing in Christ. Although the discipline of denying self will be further examined later, begin asking yourself the following questions to determine its existence in your life: Are you daily choosing to set aside selfish desires to pursue the things of Christ? Are you consistently allowing God’s will to override your own?

In Luke 9:23, Jesus used the word *must* to show the requirement for each disciple to deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Him. When Jesus tells us to “take up our cross,” it’s a perfect word picture of complete sacrifice. Just as Jesus willingly sacrificed His life on the cross for the sins of the world, we, too, are to have a willing desire to sacrifice whatever Christ asks of us. Although Jesus may never ask you to sacrifice everything, He does stipulate that His disciples be genuinely willing to do so.

While sacrifice comes in various forms, all of those who choose to follow Jesus will be called to personal sacrifice—to give up things that please self for things that please Him. However, it’s assuring to know that Jesus will never ask us to do something without also supernaturally enabling us to do it. Therefore, as you depend on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, you will be able to victoriously deny self and triumphantly carry your cross regardless of what that may entail.

These two components of discipleship, denying oneself and taking up one’s cross daily, should be clearly understood and carefully considered, since they are written prerequisites to following Jesus. Are you willing to embrace personal sacrifice for the kingdom of Christ? Is there anything in this world that would prevent you from living life sold out to Him?

Paul explained a life sold out to Jesus in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15: *For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. Are you willing to surrender control of your life for the sake of following the perfect will of Jesus?*

As a result of studying God’s Word, we can begin to see what the

ongoing process of discipleship looks like: A person must first respond to Jesus' call by acknowledging Him as Savior and Lord (John 1:35–42). Additionally, the person is to abandon earthly pursuits in order to live for Christ's eternal kingdom (Luke 14:33). Also, a genuine disciple will continuously walk in obedience to the Lord and His teaching (John 8:31–32).

In Galatians 2:20 Paul wrote, *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* The life of a Christ-follower is characterized by steady growth in faith and trust, as well as increasing reliance on Jesus. Remember, commitment to the process will produce consistent progress. It's in this state of growing in total dependence on Jesus, emptied of self, that a disciple can best be used of God.

Second Timothy 2:20–21 teaches that those who follow God's directives will become most effective for His kingdom: *In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.*

A disciple is most effective for God's higher, noble purposes, when he becomes cleansed from the things that disqualify his character. As you surrender your life to Christ by becoming emptied of self, set apart to Him, and pursuant of holiness, you will become a clean vessel; an instrument useful to God, prepared to do His work. As a result, others will recognize your life as one who believes in, learns from, and follows Jesus.