

## JESUS' USE OF THE TERM *DISCIPLE*

by

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The term "discipleship" has certainly come into vogue in many circles. But for all its popularity, one can find a wide range in what people think the term means. We always run into danger when we use Biblical terminology, but assign to it 20<sup>th</sup> century definitions. Such is often the case with the term "disciple". What is needed is a proper understanding of exactly what Jesus meant as he used the term. This is no idle desire to belabor the definition of an obscure term. Our whole understanding of Jesus' Great Commission to his Church (Mt.28:19-20) hinges on our understanding of this very term, "disciple"!

Certainly the Twelve Disciples knew what Jesus meant by this term, for Jesus had spent three years making them into his disciples. So when Jesus told them to "make disciples of all the nations", they knew that he meant to do with others what he had done with them.

The trouble is that for years, most Bible scholars have taken the term "disciple" in the Great Commission to mean "convert". The Church's subsequent approach to fulfilling the Great Commission has demonstrated this fact. All too often, the church has worked to merely gain converts, and not emphasized bringing these young believers to the mature level where they are, in turn, making more disciples. This has effectively relegated the fulfillment of the Great Commission to the clergy. The result has been slow growth in a movement that Jesus had intended to proliferate like rabbits.

What is needed is as exact an understanding of what Jesus meant by the term as possible. The best way to achieve this is to do an exhaustive study of Jesus' use of the term "disciple" as recorded in the New Testament. And that is exactly what we will do. Fortunately, this is not as monumental a task as it may seem, because Jesus is quoted as using this term only 15 times. Yet 11 out of these 15 times Jesus defines the term.

Get out your Bible and look up all fifteen with us.

**#1. Matthew 26:18**

1. How does Jesus appear to be using this term here?
2. In this verse who was Jesus referring to as "disciples"

**#2. Mark 14:14** (Parallel passage to Matthew 26:18)

**#3. Luke 22:11** (Parallel passage to Matthew 26:18 and Mark 14:14)

**#4. Matthew 10:42** (Read v40-42)

1. How does Jesus appear to be using the term "disciple" here?
2. In verse 41, why would someone who received a prophet or a righteous man get a reward?
3. Verse 42 puts "disciple" in parallel with "prophet" and "righteous man" of verse 41. What can this tell you about a disciple?
4. From these verses, write a partial definition of "disciple".

**#5+6. Matthew 10:24+25** (HCSB, ESV, NASB and KJV correctly translate the word "disciple", as it is in the Greek. In NIV and NLT, it is translated "student".)

1. What is the setting of Jesus' statement?
2. What does Jesus say is expected of a disciple?
3. From verse 24, write a partial definition of the term "disciple".

**#7. Luke 6:40** (Again, HCSB, ESV, and KJV and correctly use "disciple", as the Greek. NASB and GNB use "pupil", and NIV and NLT use "student".)

1. What is the setting of Jesus' statement?
2. What can keep a disciple from becoming like his teacher?
3. From verse 40, write a partial definition of "disciple".

**#8+9. Luke 14:26+27**

1. What does Jesus mean by "hate" in verse 26?
2. How would someone know if he "hates" his "father, ... and his own life" enough?
3. How can cross-bearing practically be lived out today?
4. From these verses, write a partial definition of "disciple".

**#10. Luke 14:33** (Read Luke 14:28-32 for background.)

1. From the background passage, what is involved in "giving up all a person has"?
2. What types of things does a person have? List some.  
What types of things might keep a person from completing the task of becoming Jesus' disciple?
3. Construct a partial definition of "disciple" from these verses.

**#11. John 8:31-32**

1. What types of things are involved in "continuing in" Jesus' word?
2. What can continuing in Jesus' word set us free from?
3. From this verse, write a partial definition of a "disciple".

**#12. John 13:34-35**

1. How is loving one another a new commandment? Hadn't God commanded his people to love each other before?
2. How had Jesus' shown his love for his disciples?
3. From this verse, the world will know a person is a disciple of Jesus if he loves what type of people?
4. Write a partial definition of "disciple" from these verses.

**#13. John 15:8** (Read John 15:1-7 as background.)

1. What does Jesus mean by fruit?
2. From these verses, would a barren "Christian" be Jesus' disciple?
3. What are the results of fruit bearing?
4. Write a partial definition of "disciple" from this verse.

**#14. Matthew 13:52** (Jesus used a verb form of "disciple" here. HSCB, NIV and KJV translate it "who has been instructed". ESV translates it "has been trained". NLT, NASB and GNB translate it "who has become a disciple". Literally it would read "who has been disciplined", denoting a completed act that was done to the person.)

1. What are the new and old things that this person brings out of his storeroom?
2. How did one become a scribe, or teacher of the law? How does one get disciplined in the kingdom of Heaven?
3. Write a partial definition of "disciple" from this verse.

**#15. Matthew 28:18-20** (Again Jesus uses the verb form of "disciple". HCSB, ESV, NLT, NASB and NIV translate it "Go therefore and make disciples...". KJV translates it "Go therefore and teach...". Literally it would be "Going therefore, disciple all the nations...".

It is important to note that in Greek, only the verb "disciple" is in the imperative, or command form. All the other verbs in this verse, "Go", "baptize", and "teach", are actually participles.)

1. What does this verse say is involved in making disciples?
2. From this verse, how can you tell when you have "made a disciple"?
3. What is Jesus' strategy of world conquest?
4. Write a partial definition of "disciple" from this verse.

## ANSWERS

#1. Matthew 26:18

1. As a title.
2. The Twelve (v.20).

#4. Matthew 10:42

1. As a title.
2. Anyone who helps a prophet, shares in the prophet's reward because he shares in the ministry of the prophet. It is the same for anyone who helps a righteous man.
3. Since anyone who helps a disciple (with even as little as a cup of water) will get a reward, it is clear that a disciple, himself, will get a reward as well.
4. A disciple receives a reward for his work.

#5+6. Matthew 10:24+25

1. The sending of The Twelve.
2. To be like his teacher.
3. One who is taught. Lesser than the teacher. Becomes like the teacher.

#7. Luke 6:40

1. The Sermon on the Mount.
2. Not completing his training.
3. One who is being trained. Not above his teacher. Striving to be like his teacher.

#8+9. Luke 14:26+27.

1. One's love for anyone else should pale in the face of one's love for Jesus. It dramatically shows the priorities a disciple of Jesus must have.
2. He never lets them get in the way of his devotion/following of Jesus.
3. Your answer. But this not merely putting up with bad circumstances in this world. It involves self-denial, and taking up a redemptive ministry.
4. One who comes to Christ. One who lets no relationship stand in the way of his allegiance to Christ. One who denies himself. One who takes up a redemptive ministry. One who follows Christ.

#10. Luke 14:33

1. Counting the cost.
2. Your answer. Some people have let various things keep them from becoming Jesus' disciple.
3. One who has counted the cost. One who gives up all he has.

#11. John 8:31-32

1. Hearing the Bible, reading it, studying it, memorizing it, meditating on it, and applying it to one's life.
2. Lies of Satan and this world which would enslave us. False doctrine. Our own incorrect thoughts and feelings. Sin and its consequences.
3. One who continues in Jesus' word. One who lets Jesus' truth set him free.

#12. John 13:34-35

1. God had commanded man to love his neighbor as himself, but Jesus set a new standard of how to carry out this commandment. With the new life Christ offers comes the ability to truly fulfill this command.
2. Jesus had spent three years of his life selflessly training his disciples day and night. Earlier in the night he spoke these words, Jesus had washed their feet.
3. Fellow Christian brothers.
4. One who loves his fellow Christians just as Jesus loves us.

#13. John 15:8

1. Jesus meant spiritual reproduction, by bringing other people to believe in Jesus. He may also have meant good works, such as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).
2. In these verses, Jesus leaves no room for this possibility. The only way Jesus gives us here to prove we are his disciples is to bear fruit. (Note, the analogy may leave room for branches not yet mature enough to bear fruit. But this immaturity is a temporary condition, otherwise, the branch would be considered retarded and barren.)
3. The Father is glorified. We prove discipleship.
4. One who bears much fruit.

#14. Matthew 13:52

1. Knowledge of God. Knowledge of the Scriptures from Old Testament and New Testament.
2. By being instructed, by having someone else lead him through a training process.
3. One who has been instructed about the kingdom of God.

#15. Matthew 28:18-20

1. Going, baptizing, and teaching all nations.
2. When he is baptized and obeys all Jesus' commands, including this last command to make disciples.
3. Jesus intended his disciples to disciple others, who would in turn, disciple others, who in turn... until the whole world is reached.
4. One who was baptized. One who is taught. One who obeys all Jesus' commands. One who discipled others. One whose vision is for all nations.

## CONCLUSION

So from our study, the compiled definition of "disciple" is as follows:

A disciple is one who...

1. receives a reward for his work
2. is taught
3. is lesser than the teacher (Jesus)
4. strives to be like his teacher (Jesus)
5. comes to Christ
6. lets no relationship stand in the way of his allegiance to Christ.
7. denies himself
8. takes up his cross (a redemptive ministry)
9. follows Christ
10. has counted the cost
11. gives up all he has
12. continues in Jesus' Word
13. lets Jesus' truth set him free
14. loves his fellow Christians as Jesus loves
15. bears much fruit
16. has been instructed about the kingdom of God
17. was baptized
18. obeys all Jesus' commands
19. disciples others
20. has a vision for all nations

Looking over this list can be overwhelming! None of us has arrived at perfect discipleship. We all have plenty of room to grow in Christ-likeness. Yet we can be assured that God is working in us to make us true disciples of Jesus. But it helps to know what a disciple looks like, if we are going to be and make them!

Therefore, from your exhaustive study of Jesus' use of the term disciple, what did Jesus mean when he gave us the Great Commission to "disciple all the nations"?

This author has grave difficulty believing that Jesus meant we were to make mere converts. JESUS IS NEVER QUOTED AS USING THE TERM "DISCIPLE" IN THAT WAY.

Therefore, what must be changed in our church and missions strategies to reach our world for Christ, to bring them in line with Jesus' own stated strategy? Are you ready to take up the challenge? Are you ready to devote yourself to discipling all the nations? Your first step may be to find someone who can help train you to be and make disciples.