

Discipleship – Making and Maturing Disciples of Jesus Christ

Even though Matthew 28:16-20 is a well-known passage, you may not be aware of the structure of it. This passage is often called the Great Commission, and in it we have a main command modified by three actions. The main verb, as in the KJV, is “teach all nations.” You probably know that a literal translation of this word is “make disciples.” Three other words describe how to do that—we make disciples by going, by baptizing, and by teaching. Each of these actions has the force of a command. The church is obligated to go into the world, preach the Gospel, baptize converts, and teach them to obey what Jesus said. That’s the goal of the church, and every disciple should be involved in fulfilling this goal.

If the main goal of the church is to make disciples, we better know what disciples are and how to make them. We should understand how to make and mature disciples of Christ. Let’s see what the text tells us about that great goal.

- I. The main task is to make disciples.
 - A. The main command in the GC is not “Go,” it’s “Make disciples.” The main goal for the church is to make more disciples of Jesus, to duplicate disciples.
 - B. But what is a disciple? Before we try to make a disciple, we’d better know what one is.
 - C. A basic definition: A disciple is a learner, a follower, a student; the pupil of a teacher.
 - D. In discipleship, two things are necessary: a teacher and a student.
 1. Jesus is the teacher—the Lord, the master. He chose a group of men to be his disciples. These men believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. His disciples were with him almost continuously throughout his earthly ministry, for about 3 years. They traveled with him, learned from him, and served with him.

2. These disciples of Jesus often fell short in their loyalty and obedience; but shortly after Jesus' resurrection, they were boldly proclaiming the Gospel and turning the world upside down for Christ.
 3. Today, we are disciples because other disciples passed the Gospel message along to us. A disciple's job is to follow the teacher and to recruit other disciples.
- E. How do you become a disciple of Jesus? You believe the Gospel.
1. You believe that Jesus is the Son of God who lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death on the cross. You believe that he died for your sins and that he rose again the third day. You believe that he is what he claims to be—the Lord, the Christ.
 2. Combined with faith in Christ is the belief that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. You confess your sins, admit them to God, and ask for forgiveness. You repent of your sins and believe in Jesus.
 3. When a person hears the Gospel, repents of his sin and believes in the person and work of X, his sins are forgiven, he's given eternal life, and he becomes a child of God. He is born again by the Spirit of God. He passes from death unto life. He is a disciple.
 4. Becoming a disciple is not merely being interested in the teachings of Jesus. It's not merely accepting the moral values that Jesus taught. Many people claim to be followers of Jesus, but their profession of faith is empty, fake, fraudulent. Jesus will say to them, "Depart from me; I never knew you."
 5. But that's *not* true of a real disciple of X. Genuine disciples deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow him. They call him "Lord" because his is the Lord of their lives.

6. Disciples of Christ follow the teachings of Christ and proclaim those teachings to others. They want others to become followers of Christ. Disciples make or help make other disciples. They want to spread the Gospel so that others hear the message and respond in repentance and faith.

7. A couple of published definitions:¹

“A Disciple is someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus (Matt. 4:19).” (Bobby Harrington)

“The word “disciple” designates a learner or follower such as an apprentice. [The word] always implies a personal attachment which shapes the whole of the disciple’s life. It is the task of the disciple to learn, study, and pass along the sayings and teachings of the master.” (Robert Coleman, *Discipleship 101*)

So the goal is not merely to make a convert, not merely to extract a profession of faith from someone. Conversion is just the beginning of the process. The goal is to make a disciple—one who professes faith in Christ and who follows him faithfully, obediently, and loyally.

F. Every believer is a disciple.

1. Some wrongly claim that there is a difference between a believer and a disciple. They say that believers are just average Christians, while disciples have a higher level of commitment.

2. Some people want to avoid the obligations that Jesus lays on his disciples, so they claim to be Christians but not disciples.

3. The truth is that every genuine believer is a disciple; the two terms are used synonymously in the NT.

Acts 11:26 ... the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

¹ These quotes, as well as some of the other materials in this message, taken from Jeff Brown’s study on Developing Disciples in the Local Church, WFBC Annual Meeting, Sept 2023.

So if you claim to be a Christian, then you must also think of yourself as a disciple. All Christians are disciples.

Mark 8:34 ... *[Jesus] said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*

4. Thus, the obligations of disciples pertain to all believers. If you *don't* want to follow Christ obediently, you should not become a disciple. Jesus urged us to count the cost before following him. Believing in Christ means following him as a disciple. He is the Lord, and it's our obligation to follow him obediently and faithfully.

Trans: So that's the goal—making disciples of IX. That's the heart of the Great Commission, our primary command.

Before going on, I want to invite non-disciples to become disciples. Jesus invites everyone to come and follow him.

Now that we know what a disciple is, we can consider how we fulfill the goal of making disciples. The main command is to make disciples, and then we find three things we need to do to fulfill the command...

II. We achieve the goal by going, baptizing, and teaching.

The word “go” in the GC in our English translations of the Bible sounds like it is the primary command here, but it's not. Grammatically, it modifies the verb “make disciples.” In this case, the word has the force of a command; that's why it's translated as “go.”

A. Disciples go out and proclaim the message.

Mr 16:15 *[Jesus] said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.*

1. Jesus commissioned the church to reach out to the world.

Acts 1:8 ... *ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

2. The book of Acts is the record of how the early church began proclaiming the Gospel around the world. The remainder of the NT shows that the Gospel had spread across much of the Roman Empire by the end of the first century because disciples of Christ were going into all the world and proclaiming the message.

App: Every Christian is obligated to reach others with the Gospel. All of us should be actively seeking to reach people around us—family members, friends, co-workers, classmates, acquaintances, etc. We must take the initiative, we must be intentional about this great task.

Some Christians do that vocationally. Evangelists and missionaries in particular make it their life work to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard it. Some people work in support positions so that others can proclaim the message.

Investing your life in doing this work would be a great use of your life.

All of us should be supporting Christian missions so that missionaries can go to places where people have not heard the Gospel.

The first step in making disciples is to go and preach the Gospel. We do this locally and personally, and we do it through our support of missionaries.

B. Disciples baptize new disciples.

1. The public sign of being a disciple of Christ is water baptism. We often call it the first step of obedience after salvation.
2. Water baptism is a NT command; Jesus' disciples submit to water baptism.
3. Notice that you make a disciple first, then you baptize him.
 - a) Baptism is *not* a means of salvation; it's not a step toward salvation or part of the process of salvation. We do not believe in baptismal regeneration. We believe in salvation by repentant faith, not by baptism.

1Co 1:17 *For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: ...*

- b) So there is no room for baptizing babies in the NT. No text in the whole Bible teaches baby baptism; it is simply not biblical.
 - c) We baptize believers only; only those who profess to be saved are suitable candidates for baptism.
4. The biblical mode of baptism is immersing the new disciple under water. The word “baptize” normally means “to dip, dunk, or immerse.” The word can have broader meaning, but when it comes to the practice of water baptism, it means immersing in water. So that’s the proper means of baptism—dunking the convert under water. We don’t sprinkle or pour; we immerse.
 5. Baptized people are brought into the fellowship of the church. Baptism is the initiating ritual for entrance into the church. Converts come into the church through baptism. Non-baptized people cannot be church members.
 6. That tells us that baptism is an ordinance of the local church. A designated representative authorized by the church should do the baptisms. The church administers baptism.
 7. Once you are baptized, you are joined to a church. Baptism and church membership go together—you get baptized and join a church—that’s the NT pattern.

Acts 2:41, 47 *Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.... And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.*

And note here that these baptized disciples were added to a local church. It’s not talking about the universal/invisible church here.

Some people try to avoid the responsibility of being a member of a local church by claiming membership in the universal church. But that's not what's in view here; baptized people were added to the local church.

8. If a person claims to be a disciple of X but refuses to be baptized, it brings his profession of faith into question. Why would a genuine believer refuse to get baptized? There is no excuse for failing to submit to baptism if you are a believer in Christ.

App: Perhaps someone here has been saved but has not yet been baptized. We can take care of that problem for you.

Perhaps you are baptized but not a member of the church. We'd be delighted if you would join our church and be a part of the membership.

Once a person professes faith in Christ and is baptized, then what happens?

- C. Disciples teach other disciples to obey everything that Jesus taught.
 1. Remember that a disciple is a learner, a student. Jesus is the leader and teacher, and the disciple is the follower and student.
 2. A primary goal for disciples is to learn what Jesus taught and apply those principles in our lives.
 - a) The Gospels—Matt, Mark, Luke, and John—contain a record of the teachings of Jesus. Disciples should learn what Jesus said as recorded in the Gospels.
 - b) The teachings of Jesus are further explained and expanded by the apostles of Jesus. The remaining books of the NT record what the apostles of Jesus taught.

Ac 2:42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine ...
 3. Thus, it's our obligation as a church to teach the NT and the rest of the Bible as part of our ministry. We want to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

4. All disciples should be actively and intentionally pursuing Christian growth, development, and maturity in the faith. We never achieve a perfect state of discipleship; we can always be more Christ-like. Discipleship is a life-long pursuit of growth and maturity in the Christian faith.

Mt 7:24 Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock:

James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

2 Peter 3:18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. ...

And it's a great privilege to help disciples in this process, to help other disciples grow. We should be looking for opportunities to help other disciples grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. Of course, that starts at home, with our own families.

- D. Jesus gave further definition to discipleship.

We'll finish up by looking at seven qualities that should be true in disciples. All disciples should be seeking to fulfill these definitions. If you fail in these areas, your discipleship is questionable and may in fact be false.

1. Disciples persevere in faith and in good works. They continue in Jesus' word faithfully and loyally. They retain their commitment to Jesus, even during the trials and temptations of life.

John 8:31 Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

Sadly, some who claim to be disciples do not persevere.

John 6:66 From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.

2. Disciples assemble regularly for worship, instruction, fellowship, and service (Acts 20:7; Heb 10:25). I.e., they form churches and meet together regularly.
You don't have to force or entice disciples to assemble. They want to worship, fellowship, and learn.
3. Disciples are humble servants (Mt 20:25-28; John 13:14).
4. Disciples earnestly contend for the faith (Acts 14:6-16; 17:18-34; 21:40-22:24; 24:1-23; 26; 1 Peter 3:15-16; Jude 3).
5. Disciples live holy, upright lives (Acts 15:29; 1 Peter 1:13-16).
6. Disciples confess and forsake sin (Matthew 18:15-35; Luke 22:59-62; John 21:15-17; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1; 1 John 1:8-10).
7. Disciples endure persecution faithfully (Mt 10:22-25; Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:1-2, 12-13).

The prime directive for the church in the GC is to make disciples. We do that by going out into the world and proclaiming the Gospel, by baptizing converts and channeling them into churches, and by teaching disciples to obey all that Jesus taught.

How do you know if you are a genuine disciple of Jesus? If you have repented of your sin and believed in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are a disciple. If you are persisting in the faith and in good works, then you are a disciple. If you are involved in the process of going out into the world, baptizing converts, and teaching them to observe what Jesus' taught, you are a disciple. If you are characterized by the marks of a disciple, then you are a disciple.

On the other hand, if none of that is true of you, then you are most certainly not a disciple, even if you claim to be one. Claiming to be saved does not make you a disciple. True disciples demonstrate the marks of discipleship—particularly, they continue faithfully in Jesus' word.

Every disciple should be doing something to make more disciples and help them grow in the faith. We can instruct our own children in the things of God. We can support missionaries who make disciples. We can instruct new believers in the faith. We can teach a SS class, VBS, children's church, or a Bible study. Some of us might pursue vocational ministry, perhaps becoming a pastor, missionary, or evangelist. *All* of us ought to be doing something to help fulfill the Great Commission mandate of making disciples and helping them grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus. What contributions are you making in the effort to make and mature disciples?

And we should take responsibility for our own growth and maturity in the faith. Others certainly help us mature in the faith, but we have to pursue discipleship ourselves. We must be active and intentional in following after Jesus, learning the word of God, and living a Christ-like life.

Let's be disciples indeed, and let's engage in the great work of making and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ.