

Go and Make Disciples

INTRODUCTION

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18–20). The command is clear, yet questions remain. What is a disciple? How do we personally follow Christ? What does discipleship look like in the home? How do we implement discipleship in our churches? How do we help new converts become disciples? The purpose of this paper is to offer answers to these questions and to provide resources which will help us “go and make disciples.”¹

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

The word “disciple” (*mathētēs*) means “learner, pupil, follower.”² Throughout the Gospels, it was used to refer to those who followed after a rabbi or teacher in order to learn from him and emulate his way of living (cf. Matt 10:24–25).³ For Christians, being a disciple means being a follower of Jesus. He is our master, and our goal as His disciples is to learn His teachings, model His way of living, adopt His values, and embrace His beliefs. In short, we want to become like Him in every area of life—thought, word and deed. “When Jesus commanded us to ‘make disciples,’ He meant more than converts or church members; He meant those who take up their cross daily and follow Him.”⁴

The master-disciple relationship sounds a little strange to us today. Perhaps the best modern equivalent we can understand and identify with is the coach-player relationship. When you join a sports team, you become a disciple of your coach. You place yourself under his authority and agree to do whatever he tells you. Your goal is to learn to think about the game like your coach, to model his actions and follow his direction. You are subject to his correction and discipline, and you work hard to earn his praise and respect. Being a member of a professional sports team is not a part-time endeavor. It affects every area of your life. It's the same way with being a disciple of Jesus. It's a life-long commitment that requires us to give 100% in order to be successful.

¹ The primary resource that accompanies this paper is the website: <http://comeafterme.com>. The contents of this paper may be found under the “Discipleship” menu, the various lessons under the “Lessons” menu, and the Bible reading and prayer under the “Bible” menu.

² L&N §36.38; Thayer 3285.

³ It was used to refer to: the followers of John (e.g., Matt 9:14), the followers of Jesus (e.g., Matt 5:1; 8:23; 11:1), and the followers of the Pharisees (Mark 2:18).

⁴ Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor: Leading Others on the Journey of Faith*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), p. 12.

HOW DO WE PERSONALLY FOLLOW CHRIST?

It's important to remember that those who are commanded to "go and make disciples" *are themselves disciples*. Think about that for a moment. Do we see ourselves as disciples of Jesus? When we think about our spiritual identity, do we resonate with the thought, "I'm a follower of Christ." Do we ask ourselves on a regular basis, "How can I become more like Jesus?" I hope that our answer to these questions is 'Yes' because being a disciple is something that each of us must do *individually*. We must:

1. Take time. The essence of eternal life is to know the Father through the Son (John 17:3). When we repented of our sins and believed in Jesus as our Savior, we began a relationship with God. As we all know, relationships take time. If we don't take time for personal discipleship, it won't happen. Jesus left us an example—He regularly left His disciples, went off by Himself, and spent time alone with God (Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). We need to do the same. We need to find a place each day where we can be alone with the Father. We should eliminate as many distractions as possible and focus our minds on God.
2. Listen to God. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31). If we want to "abide in" (know and obey) Jesus' word, we must soak ourselves in Scripture. I like the phrase, 'listening to God,' because it emphasizes that when we read the Bible, *God is speaking directly to us* (cf. 2 Tim 3:15–16; 1 Cor 9:9–10; 10:11; Rom 4:23–24; 15:4; John 1:45; 5:39; Luke 24:25–27; Gal 5:14). Most of us think of reading as a solitary activity, but when we read God's Word, *we have just entered into a conversation with our heavenly Father!*
 - a) How much of what God has said should we be interesting in hearing? Suppose I told you that Paul's letter to the church in Laodicea had been discovered in a dig in Turkey, and I said to you, "They divided the letter into ten chapters. How many chapters would you like to read?" All of them, of course! Do you have that attitude toward the entire Bible? We need to have our minds regularly exposed to the entirety of God's word. This ensures that we:
 - Get to know the Bible. God's people ought to have a basic knowledge of His Word. If we aren't familiar with the entirety of Scripture, we will overlook something God wants us to know (e.g., the feast of booths in Nehemiah 8:13–14).
 - Give God the respect he deserves. When we read the entire Bible, we show God that we honor everything He said, not just those parts we feel are particularly relevant or applicable to us. When Ezra read the law to the remnant in Jerusalem (Neh 9:3), they stood up for "a fourth part of the day." Why? They were showing God how much they respected Him and His Word.
 - Learn to appreciate the multi-faceted character of God. If we don't regularly fill our minds with everything God has revealed about Himself, our understanding of Him will become unbalanced. For example, if we only spend time reading about God's love, we'll be horrified when God tells us how He killed Uzzah for touching the ark (2 Sam 6:1–7). If we only spend time reading about God's wrath

and judgment on sin, we'll be astounded when God tells us how He restored Manasseh to the throne after he repented (2 Chr 33).

- Know where things are with respect to other things. Think about geography. If we know where the seven continents are on the globe, we can quickly find the part of the world we're looking for. When we read the Bible all the way through, we gain a bird's-eye view of Scripture that allows us to quickly locate various sections of interest. For example, we need to know where to find: what happened after the exile, the history of the early church, the law, etc.
 - See the connections between various parts of Scripture. Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is a good example of this. He started with Abraham and ended with the people who crucified Jesus, and he had it all connected. The Bible is like a tree. It's a growing revelation that starts with the roots in Genesis and ends with the fullness of the Son's revelation in the NT.
- b) In what order should we read the books of the Bible? I suggest that reading the Bible in chronological order is an excellent way to maximize our learning experience.
- Reading the Bible in chronological order gives us a better sense of the overall flow of biblical history from beginning to end. When we read chronologically, we are carried along by the unfolding story of redemption, and we gain insight into how God was working through history to bring about the salvation of men and the establishment of the Kingdom of His Son.
 - Reading the Bible in chronological order helps us put each passage of scripture in its proper historic and theological context. For example, the first sermon in the book of Haggai (Hag 1:1–13) should be read against the backdrop of the construction of the temple as recorded in Ezra 4–5 (construction started in 536 BC, but stopped after opposition by local enemies, and it did not begin again until the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah in the late summer and fall of 520 BC). Also, David's psalm of praise to God (Ps 34) is connected to the story of his escape from the Philistines in Gath where he pretended to be insane (1 Sam 21).
- c) How can we read the Bible in chronological order? I've personally tried several different chronological reading plans. I wasn't satisfied with any of them, so I decided to create my own. You can use it by clicking the "Bible" menu on the website. The plan is designed to take you through the Bible in a year, and you can read the Bible in several different versions (ESV, NASB, KJV, LEB, and NET). If you enjoy listening to the Bible, you can have it read to you in the English Standard Version, courtesy of <http://esvbible.org>. The availability of this plan on the internet facilitates groups of people reading the same passage of Scripture each day.
3. Talk to God. All of us have struggled with what to say to God when we pray, and I'm sure we've all thought, "It would be so much easier to pray if God would just speak to me." Well, the good news is...he has! As I said earlier, when we read the Bible, God is speaking directly to us (cf. Heb 12:5a). All we have to do is respond to what He has said. Think about what this means for prayer: (1) It means we don't have to think up

something to pray about each day—we can simply talk to God about what He told us in the daily reading; (2) It means we can have a *conversation* with our heavenly Father. He loves to talk to us and to hear what we've learned from His Word; (3) It means prayer can become more than just bringing a list of names and concerns to God. Prayer can be the most uplifting and exciting part of our daily walk with Christ!

- a) How do we pray about what we just read? I've written a prayer for each day of the Bible reading plan. The prayers are designed to help you praise God, learn lessons from His Word, reflect on how Scripture applies to your life, ask God for grace and strength to live for Him throughout the day, and thank God for all that He's done for you. You can pray these prayers as your own, or you can print out the "Daily Prayer Template" and write your own prayers. The goal is for your Bible reading and prayer time to be a conversation with God that challenges you and enriches your life.
4. Consecrate. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). The key to discipleship is self-denial. We must die to ourselves daily (give up the right to have our own way), and we must obey the Spirit, even to the point of death. That's the example Jesus left us, and we must follow in his steps (1 Pet 2:21). I suggest that we add this prayer to our daily conversation with God: "Father, thank you for your grace, which gives me the desire and power to do your will. Today, I consecrate myself to you. Help me to resist temptation and to say 'Yes' to the Holy Spirit. Help me to live each moment under His influence."
5. Be accountable. We all need a fellow believer to whom we can be accountable. We need to humble ourselves and confess our faults to them (Prov 28:13; Jam 5:16), and then ask them to enter into a commitment of accountability. We are not meant to live the Christian life apart from the help and encouragement of the church. That's why accountability to other believers is so important (cf. Heb 3:12–14; 10:23–25; 1 Thess 5:11; Gal 6:1–2).
6. Model discipleship. Paul told the Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Although sound teaching is essential to discipling others (cf. 2 Tim 1:13), our personal example is the foundation on which disciple-making is built. If we aren't being disciples ourselves, our plans to make disciples will falter and fail.

WHAT DOES DISCIPLESHIP LOOK LIKE IN THE HOME?

Most people think that discipleship starts in the church, but actually, discipleship begins at home. One of the reasons we're losing our children to the world is because we've taken a passive role and expect the church to disciple our children. *We must disciple our families!* That means we should:

1. Lead. Encourage each member of your family to practice personal discipleship. The husband should lead by example, and the wife and children should follow the husband's leadership. When an entire family is engaged in personal discipleship, the results are amazing. I recommend that you have your family on a common reading plan since this will facilitate discussions of God's Word.

2. Fellowship. Take time each day to discuss what God is telling you in the daily reading. Share ideas and personal applications. Help your family develop the habit of discussing their relationship with God: what they're learning, how they're growing, what God has been saying to them, etc. This will prepare them to discuss spiritual things with people outside your family.
3. Teach. Schedule a time each week/month when your family gets together for a discipleship lesson. Make the occasion special, something your family will look forward to during the week. Pick a lesson from the website (see the "Lessons" menu), and go over the material. Encourage questions—don't worry about covering the entire lesson in a single session. As time goes by, and your family gets used to the process, have your children take turns being the teacher/facilitator. This will prepare them to host a discipleship group of their own one day. If your children grow up with daily discussions of God's Word and regular discipleship lessons, it will be natural for them to disciple others.

Here are some ideas for singles: (1) If you're not in a relationship with someone, promote personal discipleship among your friends. (2) If you are in a relationship, start reading the Bible together using the Bible reading plan. In either case, encourage your parents and siblings to join you in personal discipleship.

HOW DO WE IMPLEMENT DISCIPLESHIP IN OUR CHURCHES?

One of the reasons our churches aren't growing is because we aren't discipling the sheep. If we want to have healthy, vibrant churches, we must:

1. Promote personal discipleship. Pastors need to tell their congregations that they are committed to practicing personal discipleship, and then lead by example. Pastors should also call on the men in their churches to step up and be an example to their families. Imagine a church where everyone was practicing personal discipleship each day!
2. Promote family discipleship. Pastors need to explain the basics of family discipleship to their congregations, and encourage them to begin immediately. Pastors should also encourage their churches to be on the same reading plan. This will be very helpful in promoting discussions of what everyone is learning from God's Word.
3. Train the core. Pastors should take stock of their congregations and decide which individuals make up the core (the people you can always count on, the people who are there every time the doors are open, the people who testify that God is doing something in their lives). Pastors should then choose one or two couples from the core and begin a weekly/monthly discipleship session with them. It doesn't matter if they are the most mature people in the church—the goal is to train them to disciple others. As in family discipleship, the occasion should be a time of food and fellowship, because discipleship is founded on friendship. As time goes on, have them take turns leading the sessions. This will prepare them to host discipleship groups of their own. The goal here is to spend a year or two with these couples, and then have them pick out another couple in the church

and begin discipling them. They should know at the beginning that this is the natural progression—be disciplined so that you can then disciple others.

Here are some ideas for laymen: (1) Encourage your friends at church to begin practicing personal discipleship. Use positive peer pressure to get everyone on board! (2) Begin discipling your family, and then ask your pastor if he would be willing to disciple you. (3) If you feel ready to disciple others yourself, ask for your pastor's permission to start a discipleship group in your home.

HOW DO WE HELP NEW CONVERTS BECOME DISCIPLES?

Discipling new believers is at the heart of Jesus' command to “go and make disciples.” Without proper guidance, many new Christians become confused and discouraged in their walk with Christ. We must:

1. Nurture. New converts are like babies—they need lots of love, care and attention. Pastors should work to build a strong relationship with their new converts. I recommend that pastors interact with them daily in order to counsel them and guide their progress.
2. Promote personal discipleship. As soon as possible, pastors should encourage their new converts to practice personal discipleship. Hold them accountable and praise them as they begin to grow and mature in these important disciplines.
3. Teach weekly. Pastors should meet with their new converts every week for a discipleship lesson. Whenever possible, do this in the home of the new convert. People are most comfortable in their own environment, and it will make sharing and accountability much easier. Begin with fellowship and be prepared to address issues that come up during this time. Sometimes a problem will be mentioned that should take precedence over the intended lesson. Be sensitive to what they need to talk about. Also, be transparent. It's good for new converts to know that all believers face the same battles they do. As time goes by, and the new converts get used to the process, have them take a turns being the teacher. This will prepare them to host a discipleship group of their own one day.

Here are some ideas for laymen: (1) Reach out to new converts and be friendly to them. They often lose many of their old friends and they need new ones. (2) Be understanding and patient with new converts. They often have many habits (dress, speech, etc.) that need to be dealt with, but *leave that to your pastor*. He will help them conform to Scripture over time.