

Discipleship Defined

a sermon in the series
The Apprentice: An Analysis of What it Means to be a Disciple

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Matthew 4:19

Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Air Force Captain Amy Svoboda was the first female Air Force fighter pilot to die in a crash. In 1997, disoriented after a practice bombing dive, Svoboda pulled up to ascend but failed to realize she was flying upside down and drove her A-10 jet into the ground at 400 mph. I fear there are a great many in the church and out of the church that are completely disoriented about what it means to be a true follower of Christ and they will soon crash unless they understand the truth of their position and can be uprighted.

Many today are completely upside down about discipleship. And I do believe it is intentional. Never before has there been more solid material available on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus as there is now.

In other words, many professing Christians want to fly without instrumentation. If Captain Svoboda would have followed her training and not her instincts she would have relied on the instrumentation that told her she was upside down. The Bible is the instrumentation panel that gives us the vital information we need to be a true disciple of our Lord, but I fear many purposefully ignore it.

The 18th century writer, William Law, attributed the failure to love Christ as Christ commanded to intentionality. He examined the question as to "why the generality of Christians fall so far short of the holiness and devotion of Christianity." He answered that it was not because of a lack of knowledge or ability to be devoted to Christ. Rather, it is because a person doesn't intend to truly live as Christ. He uses the sin of profanity as an illustration.

Now the reason of common swearing is this; it is because men have not so much as the intention to please God in all their actions. For let a man but have so much piety as to intend to please God in all the actions of his life, as the happiest and best thing in the world, and then he will never swear more. It will be as impossible for him to swear, whilst he feels this intention within himself, as it is impossible for a man that intends to please his prince, to go up and abuse him to his face.

And if you will here stop, and ask yourselves, why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you, that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it (William Law, *A Serious and Devout Call to a Holy Life*).

Your heart can be so easily swayed. A rousing sermon or a moving song, challenges you. You feel the emotion of your heart trembling. You pray to God, “Father God, I promise from this moment on You can have all of me.” But within a short amount of time you’re back in the same rut. William Law is saying—and I agree—your failure to keep your promise is not because you didn’t have the ability to keep your promise; the problem is you never really intended to keep it in the first place. I know you resist that, but let’s delve a little bit deeper in your psyche. When you made that commitment, you meant it. I know you did. There’s no argument. You meant it at that moment. But if you could dig a little bit deeper there was a part of you, maybe subconscious at that moment, that said *Try your best at this, but if you fail, it’s okay, God’s grace will take care of it. God understands.* That very sentiment pulled the rug out from under intentionality. If a man intends with all of his heart, he can do it. And on top of that he can do it because God has promised He would give him the power and desire to do it. Therefore I think Law is correct.

Why is there no serious intention to be like Jesus? Here’s the problem. We’ve made a distinction between being a Christian and being like Jesus. I truly am convinced that the answer is rooted in how we define the Christian. Today, we define a Christian as someone who goes to church on Sunday. But the New Testament defines a Christian by another standard—a person who followed Jesus. In other words, a disciple.

Today, I want to begin a series that will give us an instrument panel to fly high and fly right. We are to be disciples and we are to make disciples; therefore we must ask the question of the instrument panel, the Scriptures, what it means to be a disciple and not what we have changed the word to become.

I believe these messages starting today will have strategic impact on us this year and in the years to come. I see it as a part of what God wants to do right now in our body, and in my life in particular. I confessed last Wednesday night, I’ve taught a lot about discipleship but, with the exception of a few of you, I’ve never trained you to be disciples. I’ve failed this church miserably for that. In repentance I want to bring to you this word on not just what it means information wise, but hopefully in the future to implement a system of training you to be disciples. I don’t know how to quite do this as of yet, I’m still praying and seeking God and I would enlist your prayer support. But within a few months we are not only going to take information learned in these messages to other places and settings but we’re going to put you in predicaments and situations where you will be trained hands-on as an apprentice of Jesus Christ.

It’s so important to me, to Christ, and to this church that you really know what it means to be a follower of Jesus so you can follow Him.

I. The Meaning of the Word *Disciple*

The word *disciple* means learner or student. When you send your children to school tomorrow you are sending disciples to those people we call teachers. The word *disciple* means a student, a learner, a pupil. When Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, He was in fact, calling them to be His students. "Follow Me. Come and learn from Me. Come and be My student."

Jesus the man did not invent discipleship. For two hundred years Jewish Rabbis had developed the rabbinical tradition of discipling men and Jesus took much of that structure but changed and modified it. I don't want to find out what a Jewish Rabbi meant by *disciple* or even just the simple definition of student, I want to know what Jesus made discipleship to be.

When I process things or go to make a decision, I first try to figure out all my options, and then after I've got all my options, I look at them and find which ones do not work, and by that time the decision is made. Once I've cleared all the options that will not work, hopefully I'll find one that will. That's what I usually do when I preach and that's what I'm going to do again.

A. What Disciple Doesn't Mean.

A disciple is not just a learner of Christian facts and history. Yes they are a learner, but that's not all he or she does to be a Christian. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ does not mean you have learned certain facts of Christianity and can agree with them. It doesn't matter how much an unconverted person studies the Bible and observes Christian behavior. Simply agreeing with that will not make him a believer. There are children here that can be taught chapters of the Bible and recite them perfectly and yet the reciting of that chapter or verses does not make them a believer. Just the bare name *student* is not a sufficient definition and understanding of what Jesus meant when He said, "follow Me."

A disciple is not someone who in the least professes faith in Christ. In the last fifty years we've seen an epidemic of people professing faith in Christ who do not follow Him. So just to say *I believe in Jesus* doesn't mean you're a disciple of Christ.

A disciple is not a spiritually superior Christian. One of the great deceptions of modern Christianity is in this very area. It's the deception that you can be a Christian but not necessarily a disciple. There is a belief that there is somehow a dichotomy, a difference, a distinction, between being a Christian and being a disciple as if it was optional. Discipleship is not optional. That's the whole point of this message. If you want to be a Christian you cannot opt out of discipleship. And yet many people teach, and even books are written, that say you can be a believer in Jesus Christ but not go on to true discipleship.

They illustrate it this way: a man can work for a company and be quite satisfied just being an employee, gaining his salary, and benefits and hopefully one day retiring. He's an employee of the company but there are others not so satisfied to be just an employee but who want to climb

the corporate ladder. So they work harder and do more to apply themselves, maybe even taking night classes to work themselves into management and maybe one day run the company. Both are employees but one has chosen to be more dedicated to the company than the other.

That's how some people teach discipleship. You're a Christian, you're saved and when you die you're going to heaven, but you may not be thoroughly committed like some people who want to go further and deeper and excel in the Christian faith, like a pastor or missionary. My brothers and sisters, do not swallow that hook. The bait may seem tasty and appealing but it is barbed, I assure you, there is a hook in it. Discipleship is not optional.

B. What Being a Disciple of Jesus Means.

A follower of Jesus.

Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:19)

If you want to be a disciple, if you want to be a Christian, follow Jesus.

When you add Jesus' command to follow Him, you could then say that a disciple is a learner who follows Jesus.

Be where Christ is. Some of the best advice I give is the simplest. You want to know what Christ's will is for your life? Just keep your eyes on Jesus and be wherever He is and you'll always be in the right place. Follow Him.

In modern vernacular we could call a disciple an apprentice. It's somebody who has learned a certain occupation or trade not just in the classroom but from someone who is more experienced than he or she. For example, you want your doctors to have been apprenticed before they practice on you. How would you like to go into surgery where the surgeon has never operated before and you're his first case? For that reason there is included in the instruction of physicians a required period of residency where they take what they've learned from the classroom and put it to use. They do so under the supervision of an experienced doctor. They watch the master and learn by observation. It's not just true in such a skilled profession as doctors but in other trades like electricians, carpenters, and masons. There are master electricians and then there are people who sign on as apprentices to listen to the instruction of that person who is more experienced. They watch how the master craftsman does it so they too can, with time, do the exact same thing as efficiently. So we can say a disciple is somebody who follows Jesus to be mentored by Him as His apprentice.

A disciple is Christian and a Christian is a disciple. There is no distinction. In Acts 11:26 it tells us that in the city of Antioch "the disciples were first called Christians." Do you know how many years had transpired since the Pentecost when that statement was made? Ten years. That means from the beginning of Christ's ministry, 13 or so years of Christianity, all followers of

Christ were called *disciples*. A disciple is a Christian and a Christian is a disciple.

If anyone comes to Me (comes to me, do you hear that?) and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26-27)

Here Jesus equates coming to Him for salvation and being a disciple. *Anyone who comes to Me.* Jesus also said, “He who is thirsty, let him come unto Me.” Anyone coming to Christ is coming to be saved, to be forgiven of their sins, to be born again. Those who come to Him are disciples. He makes being a Christian the same thing as being a disciple.

So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:33)

For several decades the churches in Europe and America have not required discipleship a condition of being a Christian. That’s the fundamental problem facing the church today in the west. We have not made discipleship a requirement for being a Christian. It is not demanded that one be a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain in the church without any signs of progress, growth, or advancement in discipleship. Don’t misunderstand, I didn’t say it was discipleship that was ignored, I said it was not demanded nor required. A man can be considered a Christian without regard to being a disciple. That one lie has damned more souls than I know of. It’s greater than many of the heresies of the early church; it’s greater than the agnosticism and evolution. It is absolutely wrong for you to tell somebody they can be a Christian and ask Jesus into their heart and won’t be expected to be like Jesus.

So what is a disciple?

A disciple is one who sacrifices his life to following Jesus in order to be like Him.

Friends, this definition comes from years and years of studying. I don’t take these definitions lightly. I pore over them; I pray over them; I wrestle with them. I’ve changed it, and I’ve deleted words to find the right words. Every word is strategic and this series is going to unpack those words for you.

That’s what the word *disciple* means, and it’s what the word *Christian* means. It’s the same definition for both because they’re one and the same.

II. How a Disciple Follows Jesus

Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Matthew 4:19)

What does that look like? For Peter, John, James, and Andrew it looked like dropping their nets, leaving their families, kissing their wives goodbye, and following Jesus down the road away from Capernaum. Then does being a disciple mean that I have to sell my home, sell my possessions,

become a vagabond, and wander around the countryside preaching? No it doesn't, unless Jesus tells you to do that. Here's what I believe following Jesus means for us today, three things: Worship, obedience, and submission.

Worshipping Jesus.

To follow Jesus means you are a worshipper of Him. Where did I get the word *worshipper* out of following Jesus? Easy. Worship is the act of building life on something or someone. When you follow someone and devote your life to him or her, your life is lived an act of worship to that individual. When you follow Jesus, you make Jesus the object of worship.

Quit thinking of the word *worship* within the confines of this hour on Sunday morning. That's a most dangerous concept of worship. It's faulty, it's erroneous, and it's wrong. What we do here today is more specifically, biblically defined as praise. When you sing to the Lord you're singing praises and thanking Him. Is that worship? It's part of worship, it's an act of worship, but that's not all that worship is. What then is worship?

It's to consider something so valuable that you will revolve your life around and build your life on it. That's what worship is. Romans 12:1 is the best definition in all the Word of God to define what it means to worship.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

That's worship. Your whole life is built upon Christ because you've discovered Christ is worth it and you've not found anything more valuable. So when Jesus says, "Follow Me," He is saying I am sufficient to build your life around. Jesus summarized the whole Sermon on the Mount with one story, the parable of the two builders. One was wise and one was foolish. The wise builder built his house on the rock; the foolish builder built his house on sand. And when the storms came the wise man that built his house on the rock withstood the storm and the foolish man's house was destroyed. What is Jesus saying in that parable? He is saying, "I'm the Rock! I'm sufficient to recalibrate your life and order it around Me. I'm strong enough to withstand anything that you will encounter in your life and you will be safe with Me because I am that weighty, I am that valuable, I am that priceless treasure that you can assuredly build your life upon." Anything or any person that you make so important in your life that you begin to shape your life around them becomes your god.

My God is Jesus. I've shaped my life around Him. I'm following Him, which means I am worshipping Him because He is sufficient for me. He satisfies like no one else.

Obeying Jesus.

This is real simple, but it's where we struggle. We don't struggle in the higher theologies we struggle in the very simple things. To follow Jesus involves obeying Jesus. And obeying Jesus simply means to do what He says and what He does.

How do I obey Jesus?

You live as He lived. If you're going to obey Jesus you have to live as He lived. The question is, do I have to sell my home and all my possessions, leave my family, and go to Africa? Or maybe someone is thinking, *I don't understand how I am supposed to live like He lived. How can anyone do that? He didn't own anything, He was never married, He went from one place to another. He lived by the gracious gifts of others. He prayed and fasted for forty days one time. Am I supposed to do all of that? Is that what you mean by living as Jesus lived?* No. What I mean by living as He lived is to adopt a simple lifestyle that Jesus demonstrated. We will have separate messages unpacking this; this is merely introductory today. To live as He lived is to follow the lifestyle of Jesus. A simple life, an uncluttered life, and a purposeful life, that's the kind of life Jesus lived.

Doing what He commanded. One of the problems of our misunderstandings of grace is that we believe grace is just that thing that gets you forgiven and into the kingdom and that's it. Where did we get this concept? I beg you to answer that. We didn't get that from the Bible. Grace is much more powerful. Don't strip grace of its power. If all it can do is forgive you and secure your home in heaven that's wonderful, but is that all it can do? The grace the Bible teaches me goes beyond forgiveness and is literally transforming me into something, it's changing me. Those commands of Jesus are there for a reason. You cannot ignore what Jesus has taught you to do. There is not one commandment of Jesus you can strike and say, "This is not necessary." If you are to follow Jesus you must obey what He said and that means His commands.

Teaching what He taught. We're going to devote several messages to that statement. "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." In that statement Jesus said to these four disciples, "The end result is going to be that you're going to teach others. You're going to fish for other men just like I fish for men and you're going to catch them." So if you're to follow Jesus it means you need to teach what Jesus taught. What did Jesus say in the Great Commission? "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you**" (emphasis mine).

Submitting to Jesus' workmanship

Jesus said if we follow Him we are submitting to Him to make us fishers of men. This is His work. Look at the text again. "Follow Me, and **I** will make you fishers of men." I've read this I don't know how many times and I didn't see that until this week. "Follow Me, and **I** will..." Christ is saying, "It's My workmanship, it's My business, My work to make you like Me, to make you a person who will be a fisher of men and I will do it." Hallelujah! I am to cooperate and submit, but it's His work. I'm His project and He never fails. Follow Him, worship Him, obey Him, and submit to Him and you will be a disciple who makes disciples.

III. The Purpose of a Disciple

Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Matthew 4:19)

As disciples, literally apprentices of Jesus, our goal is to learn to be like Him. That's our goal—not to make heaven, but to be like Him. The goal of salvation is not an eternal home on high. That's a fringe benefit. The ultimate goal and agenda of salvation is to make you like Jesus.

It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they call those of his household! (Matthew 10:25)

A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher. (Luke 6:40)

Are you like Jesus? Let the question hang in the air, let it stand before your conscience. Answer the question. Are you like Jesus? Everybody withdraws back and says, "No, I'm not." But some of us can say, "No, not completely. Not yet." Those who are disciples can say that. Salvation is this process of becoming like our Lord.

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Let me put it in my own words. With no hindrance we can see Jesus. Hindrances in seeing Jesus have been removed and now we see Him and we're being transformed into the same image from glory to glory. In other words, the moment you were saved glory took place and you began at that moment to be just like this glorious Jesus and you are still being transformed from glory here to glory there with Him. Completely transformed altogether. That's the goal of discipleship. That's what it means to be a disciple.

There may be an objection right now and I understand it. It's a very important one. Somebody could argue right now and say, "Are you not adding works to becoming a Christian? If discipleship is a requirement of salvation, then aren't you adding works and abandoning grace?"

Good question.

I would like to answer your question with a question. How is it possible for someone to live this kind of life apart from grace? I can't live this way. There's none of us who can. I'm not abandoning grace; I'm only declaring a greater need for it. Again, the reason for the question is the narrowing of what this grace is and making it fit one little keyhole in a series of keyholes we call the Christian life. We have one little keyhole over here that we call Forgiveness of Sin and another Assurance of Salvation and we make grace comprise of these two things and we forget about all the other things grace is.

Salvation by grace is a radical transformation. It's not just the forgiveness of sins but it is the hand of God changing you from what you once were into the very image of His Son. That's what God is doing in your life. You're not saved completely yet. You have been saved but are still in the process. You are His workmanship, created under Christ Jesus for good works. But whose good works are they? Yours? Mine? No. They are the work of Christ in us. Salvation is a radical transformation. To leave me just forgiven and no better than that is a cheap Gospel and I want nothing to do with it.

Those who are saved immediately become like Jesus in some ways. The moment you're saved you become like Him. Your heart has been radically changed. His law has been written on your heart. He comes and lives within you. There are some changes that take place immediately. Even the countenance radiates the change. But dear friend, we still have a long way to go to become like Him completely. The remainder of your Christian walk is spent following Jesus in order to be like Him. The Bible says this is what God is doing in you and in me.

I know you've all heard this story, I've told it before. But it fits this message so well that I want to repeat it. It's the story of a wealthy man and his son who owned a great estate and loved to collect rare works of art. They had everything in their collection, from Picasso to Raphael. They would often sit together and admire the great works of art. When the Vietnam conflict broke out, the son was drafted and went to war. He was very courageous and died in battle while rescuing another soldier. The father was notified and grieved deeply for his only son.

About a month later, just before Christmas, there was a knock at the door. A young man stood at the door with a large package in his hands. He said, "Sir, you don't know me, but I am the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He saved many lives that day, and he was carrying me to safety when a bullet struck him in the heart and he died instantly. He often talked about you, and your love for art."

The young man held out this package. "I know this isn't much. I'm not really a great artist, but I think your son would have wanted you to have this."

The father opened the package. It was a portrait of his son, painted by the young man. He stared in awe at the way the soldier had captured the personality of his son in the painting. The father was so drawn to the eyes that his own eyes welled up with tears.

He thanked the young man and offered to pay him for the picture. "Oh, no sir, I could never repay what your son did for me. It's a gift."

The father hung the portrait over his mantle. Every time visitors came to his home he took them to see the portrait of his son before he showed them any of the other great works he had collected.

The man died a few months later. There was to be a great auction of his paintings. Many influential people gathered, excited over seeing the great paintings and having an opportunity to purchase one for their collection.

On the platform sat the painting of the son. The auctioneer pounded his gavel. "We will start the bidding with this picture of the son. Who will bid for this picture?"

For quite some time - there was only silence.

Then a voice in the back of the room shouted, "We want to see the famous paintings. Skip this one."

But the auctioneer persisted. "Will someone bid for this painting? Who will start the bidding? \$100? \$200?"

"We did not come to see this painting. We came to see the Van Goghs, the Rembrandts. Get on with the real bids!"

But still the auctioneer continued. "The son! The son! Who'll take the son?"

Finally, a voice came from the very back of the room. It was the longtime gardener of the man and his son. "I'll give \$10 for the painting." Being a poor man, it was all he could afford.

"We have \$10, who will bid \$20?" announced the auctioneer.

"Give it to him for \$10. Let's see the masters!"

"\$10 is the bid, won't someone bid \$20?"

The crowd was becoming angry. They didn't want the picture of the son. They wanted the more worthy investments for their collections.

The auctioneer pounded the gavel. "Going once, twice, Sold for \$10.00."

A man sitting on the second row shouted, "Now let's get on with the collection!"

The auctioneer laid down his gavel. "I'm sorry, the auction is over."

"What about the paintings?"

"I am sorry. When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will. I was not allowed to reveal that stipulation until this time. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. The man who took the son gets it all!"

Now of course you see the obviousness of this illustration. Whoever gets the Son of God gets it all. But that's not the point of the story. The point of the story is not getting it all. The point of the story is the gardener's fascination with the son that would compel him to take hard earned money and spend it on a mediocre rendition of the son. That's the point.

Are you fascinated with the Son? Does He thoroughly enthrall, excite your soul so that you're willing to lay down everything about life and yield the control of your life to Him because you find Him fascinating? Do you see Him so fascinating in Himself that He's worth your life to pursue? A disciple does. You could have cried tears at this altar, you could have been immersed in baptismal waters here, but if you're not fascinated with the Son to follow Him and learn of Him so that you might be like Him you are not His. I don't know how to make it any plainer than that. In this time of confusion, plainspoken words are needed. Are you fascinated with Jesus? For a true disciple there are other things that at times fascinate us, but we always come back to Jesus because we find nothing can satisfy like Him.

A disciple is one who sacrifices his life to following Jesus in order to be like Him.

Are you truly His disciple? Amen.