

Being a Disciple

In Greek the term "disciple" (μαθητής ; *mathatas*) is related to the verb "to learn" (μανθάνω - *manthano*) so both words will briefly be looked at.

The use of μανθάνω ("to learn") in the OT and Judaism

In the OT the word *manthano* (μανθάνω) was used of the process whereby the whole man subjects himself to the fulfillment of God's will, especially as it is revealed in the Law (Rengstorf, TDNT, IV, 401). Subjection, of course, can only be done if one knows what he should do. For this reason the requirement was to learn the Law. If the Law were not available, it would be impossible to be a disciple in the strictest sense.

It should be stressed that the knowledge of the law was for the purpose of conformity, not for the sake of gaining information. It was the ideal that all men know the Law. In the age of Messiah, "the law will go forth from Zion, even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Mic. 4:2). Messiah has knowledge of the Law, is the teacher of it, and is obedient to it. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-18, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

The destruction of the Temple (in 70 A.D.) brought a change in the way that men viewed the Law, and gradually the study of the Torah (the law) began to take precedence over practical practices such as repentance, fasting, benevolence, and even prayer, though this attitude also existed earlier (Matt. 23:23 ff.; Lk. 11:42). Since there was no Temple to offer sacrifices, the study of the law was considered to be a kind of sacrifice instead. Though the rabbis still taught that following the Law was man's chief aim, in practice they began to intellectualize the Jewish faith and gravitated toward religious theory more than outward practice.

The use of disciple (μαθητης ; *mathatas*) in the OT and Judaism

With such a large emphasis on learning the Law, one would expect the related word "disciple" (learner) to be abundant in the OT. Oddly, it is almost completely absent. Men had assistants and successors but there was no concept of the NT master/disciple relationship.

The use of disciple (μαθητης ; *mathatas*) in the NT

To be a disciple means to be a follower or a learner. In its broadest sense, it could refer to anyone who physically followed Jesus around, whether they believed in Him or not (e.g. Jn. 6:60-66). However, when used of a believer, the NT gives a unified picture of what a disciple is; it always implies the attachment of one person to another. It was assumed that the Master's belief shaped the conduct of his disciples. For example, in Mark 2:18 the question as to why Jesus' disciples do not fast is really directed toward Jesus, since it was believed that Jesus' disciples would be following their Master's example. Likewise, in Mark 2:23 it was expected that Jesus would correct His disciples' conduct. There is no reference to a disciple in the NT where the Master's teaching does not extend to the disciple's inner life.

The uniqueness of being a follower of Jesus

There were distinct differences between the OT way of thinking and being a follower of Jesus.

1) In Judaism it was the disciple's decision to link up with a teacher; Jesus, however, called His own disciples. He decided who could be a disciple and gave the content of what discipleship means. Thus, the disciples' relationship to Christ was completely personal.

The personal aspect of Jesus' discipleship is seen in another way in Luke and John. In the book of Luke, from 5:30 to 22:45 the 12 followers of Jesus are referred to as disciples about 33 times. However, from Luke 22:45 to the end of the book, at the end of Jesus' life, Luke stops calling Jesus' followers "disciples" but substitutes other expressions for them instead; they are called "*those around Him*" or "*with Him*" (Lk. 22:49; cf. 22:56, 58, 59), "*His acquaintances*" and the women who accompanied Him" (Lk. 23:49), "*the*

eleven and all the rest" (Lk. 24:9), "*them*" (Lk. 24:13), "*the eleven* and those who were with them" (Lk. 24:33). The only explanation for Luke's sudden change is that the disciples' betrayal during Jesus' suffering was seen as a breach in their relationship with Him. By leaving Jesus, they were no longer considered "disciples."

2) Furthermore, discipleship under Christ was different than both discipleship in Judaism and Greek culture. The disciples of the Greek philosophers shared "fellowship" with their teacher when they shared common knowledge. In the same way, knowledge was the key in the teacher/learner relationship in Judaism. In contrast, *faith* is the controlling factor in relation to Jesus and obedience is the test (Jn. 8:31; 13:24 ff; 14:15ff; 15:10 ff).

Obedience to Christ was to be unconditionally accepted (Lk. 14:26-33) to the point where Jesus' disciples could be called servants (Mt. 10:24 f; Jn. 13:16; 15:20; also see the parables in Matt. 24:45 ff.; 25:14 ff.; Lk. 12:35 ff.; 42 ff.).

3) In addition, learning from a Rabbi was a step to becoming a Rabbi oneself. It led to becoming independent and held the possibility of superseding one's teacher. Being a disciple of Jesus is a destiny in itself (Matt. 10:25). It is the end and the goal of every believer.

A call to discipleship is a call to work *with* Jesus (Lk. 5:1 ff). It is a call to suffer *with* Him. Jesus sees it as being a part of His family (Matt. 12:49) and as being His friend (Jn. 15:14).

The disciples learned by observing Jesus' actions (Matt. 15:23ff.; 15:32, 36; 26:8-10) and were the recipients of deeper instruction (Matt. 13:10 ff.; 16:20-21; 17:5-6, 19ff.).

Our responsibility to making disciples of Christ

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus said,

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

In other words, Jesus commanded us to make disciples. This is evangelism in its fullest sense. It is not enough to simply "lead people to Christ"; one must make disciples. Although the individual in Matthew 28:19-20 is a believer prior to being baptized, the concept that it is possible to believe and not follow, or that a disciple is simply a more committed believer is foreign to the Bible. Every true believer is a disciple or he is not a believer at all.

The command "make disciples" is followed by two modal participles that give the manner or the mode of disciple making. Namely, every follower of Christ is to; 1) be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and 2) be taught to obey all that Jesus commanded (not simply know what He said). Failure to obey or be baptized is a failure to be Christ's disciple. To be a disciple one needs to learn what Jesus commanded and learn to follow Him. The new life of a disciple is a life of obedience to Jesus' commandments, or it is not a new life at all.

Historically, Jesus' command to baptize stands at the juncture between the Old and New Testament eras. Jesus had predicted the formation of His church in Matthew 16, and was now giving instructions to the men who would eventually lead it. These men would be facing Jewish "prospects" who tenaciously held to the belief that God is One. In fact, the Jews had just crucified their Messiah for "making Himself equal to God". With this in mind, Jesus introduced His baptism "into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The Trinitarian significance of baptism was a major factor in its original formulation for it distinguished the Christian from the Jew as one who believed in the triune God, the God Christ Himself revealed.

Being baptized in the name of someone signifies identification with that person. Baptism among the Jews was a rite of initiation identifying oneself

with a particular leader. When Paul heard that certain people in Corinth were claiming to be his followers, he protested by reminding them that he had not baptized any in *his name* (I Cor. 1:10-17). Paul's point was that the one to whom our allegiance is due, the one whom we are to identify with, is the one in whose name we have been baptized - and that was Christ not him! Or to put it even more simply, he was saying, "Since you identified with Christ in baptism, stop saying 'I am of Paul!'"

So Christ made baptism a symbol of personal commitment to Himself. "In effect, the initiate, by his submission to baptism, declared himself to be a disciple of Christ and committed himself to the kind of lifestyle pertinent to that declaration" (GTJ Vol. 2/2; 1981, p. 288).

As a side note, this is one reason why we do not practice infant baptism. An infant has no knowledge of his or her identification with Christ. There is no personal commitment to Him. An infant is incapable of making a conscious declaration to be a disciple of Christ or a commitment "to the kind of lifestyle pertinent to that declaration."

Summary: Matthew 28:19-20 could be accurately expanded as follows.

Go therefore (as you are going here and there) **and make disciples** (make followers of Christ) **of all nations** (every ethnic group).

(1) **baptizing them** (immersing them with the following symbolic meaning attached)
in the name of (identifying them with) **the Father**
and (in the name) of **the Son**
and (in the name) of **the Holy Spirit,**

and

(2) **teaching them to obey**
everything that I have commanded you.