

# What is a Disciple?

Matthew 4:13-25

There are two powerful and memorable ways for people to experience God's rulership over this earth. One way is by experiencing God's judgments for ongoing, unrepentant sin. This is memorable because God's judgments are painful. The other memorable way to experience God's rule is by being faithfully obedient to His commands, which leads to joy and rich blessings. Because of the fall, most of mankind has experienced God's rulership by means of His judgments. God's preference is that we experience His blessings through joyful obedience. Our Lord Jesus came to earth so that God's blessings could increase, and His judgments decrease [this is a part of the good news of the gospel].

With this in mind let's read our text for this morning, which is Matthew 4:13-25,

*“Leaving Nazareth, he [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake [the Sea of Galilee, which is fresh water] in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali –<sup>14</sup> to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah [9:1-2]:<sup>15</sup> ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles –<sup>16</sup> the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’ [People living in darkness, are people on their way to judgment. Jesus came to bring them light and the opportunity to enjoy God's blessings]<sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’ [in other words, the King is in your presence and He wants you to experience God's blessings. What we read next is how God's blessings are to increase upon the earth]. As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.<sup>19</sup> ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’<sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him.<sup>21</sup> Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them,<sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

*23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom [the good news is that there is a way for people living in darkness to be rescued and transferred into Christ's kingdom of light. And to demonstrate that God wants to bless people, we are told that Jesus was also] . . . healing every disease and sickness among the people . . .<sup>25</sup> Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.”*

In this text of Scripture there are two groups of people who followed Jesus. There were the large crowds, many of whom had received healing from their diseases. But this group ultimately experienced God's judgment and not His blessings. The other group that followed Jesus was small, but this group ended up receiving eternal life and then went on to help change the world. What made the difference – since both groups followed Jesus?

Let's go back to verse 19 and take a closer look. Jesus said to Peter and his brother Andrew, *“Follow me . . . .”* If they were going to properly follow Jesus, it meant they must embrace Him as their leader and learn who He really is.

If we go back to verse 17, Jesus was telling the Jewish people they needed to repent because the kingdom of heaven was near. We know from other parts of the New Testament, that many Jewish people were offended by Jesus because He said they needed to repent of their sins. Didn't Jesus know that they were **God's covenant people, God's elect**? Those who were angered by being told they were sinners, were the most resistant to Christ. Jesus warned His disciples about these angry people in **Matthew 10:16-17**, *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves . . . .<sup>17</sup> Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.”*

In contrast, the Jewish people who humbly admitted they were sinners, were the most receptive to Christ. In the parallel passage that pastor Jeff read, we clearly see where Peter stood in regards to his own sinfulness. Listen as I read **Luke 5:4-11**,

*“When he [Jesus] had finished speaking [to the crowd from Peter’s boat], he said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.’<sup>5</sup> Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.’<sup>6</sup> When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.<sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.<sup>8</sup> When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’<sup>9</sup> For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,<sup>10</sup> and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.’<sup>11</sup> So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.”*

When Peter realized that Jesus knew what was in the dark depths of the sea, then Peter concluded that Jesus could also see into the dark depths of his heart. This terrified Peter and so he asked Jesus to depart from him. But when Jesus told Peter not to be afraid, he believed Jesus could do something about his sinful heart. **A true disciple of Christ, must believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He has the authority to forgive sin and grant eternal life.** Listen carefully to **John 6:66-69**,

*“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.<sup>67</sup> ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve.<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.<sup>69</sup> We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’”*

I believe the deciding difference between the small group of disciples that truly followed Jesus and the large crowds that outwardly followed Jesus, is that true followers of Christ believe He is the Son of God and have embraced Jesus as their Lord and King. The large crowds believed Jesus was a great prophet, but not the Son of God. This is confirmed in **Matthew 16:13-16**,

*“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’<sup>14</sup> They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’<sup>15</sup> ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”*

To follow Jesus properly requires us to believe that He is worthy of our highest love and sincere worship, even if that means persecution and death. If you think that statement is a bit extreme, then listen to what Jesus told His disciples in **Luke 9:23-24**,

*“Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross . . . [a cross is an implement of suffering and death] and follow me.<sup>24</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.’”*

Let me give you the original meaning of what Jesus just said. The only way I can do this is by reviewing the historical setting in which those words were spoken. On numerous occasions Jesus warned His disciples that persecution and death awaited them in the days ahead [Matthew 10:21; John 16:2]. As always, Jesus was right. The dam began to burst when Saul of Tarsus thought he was serving God by persecuting and killing Christians. And so here is what happened when the persecution got hot and heavy. Many “professing Jewish Christians” decided they had not signed up to follow Jesus if it meant persecution – and so in order to save their skins, they abandoned faith in Christ and returned to Judaism. This is one of the concerns of the book of Hebrews. In contrast, faithful Jewish Christians were willing to die for Christ. To stop following Jesus was simply not an option for them. Most of the Jewish people who fell away from Christ, ended up fleeing to Jerusalem after the Jews rebelled against Rome in A.D. 65. As a result, they were

either killed or carried off to the salt mines. The Jews who stayed true to Christ, fled from Judea – as Jesus told them to do [Luke 21:20-24] – and lived. And so literally, those who tried to save their lives by denying Christ, lost their physical lives and got off the only path that could have taken them into eternal life. Those who were willing to lose their lives in order to follow Christ, lived and helped to change the world.

An application of what Jesus said about taking up our cross is as follows: “If you have nothing worth dying for, then you have nothing worth living for.” Only when we truly believe and embrace that Jesus is the Son of the living God, will we allow Him to shape us and make us into what He wants us to be.

And what does Jesus want us to be? In **Luke 6:40**, Jesus declares, “*A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.*” A disciple is a person who is eager to be fully trained and become more like Christ. Friends, in order to be like Christ, we must spend time with Christ.

But what a minute, Jesus has ascended back into heaven. How can we spend time with Christ while we are here on earth and He is in heaven? The advantage for us concerning Jesus ascending back into heaven is that He is not limited to a mortal body. He is once again fully omnipresent, which means He can live within everyone of us, and everyone of us can be in union with Christ. In **John 15:5**, Jesus puts this truth into agricultural terms,

*“I am the vine; you [Jesus’ followers] are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

Some of the ways we remain, or abide in Jesus is by (1) studying and obeying His Word; (2) by remembering He is always present with us. One of my great joys is talking with Jesus throughout the day; (3) by being people of prayer; and (4) through fellowship with other Christians [and do not underestimate the importance of fellowship with obedient, Spirit-filled Christians].

Let’s go back to Matthew 4:19, when Jesus told Peter and Andrew, and then James and John to “*Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*” Jesus used the term “fishers of men” because Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen. That means they spent a large portion of each day thinking about fish. How to catch them and how to sell them. Does that seem trivial? Eating fish helps keep people alive.

If we want to know what it means to be a fisher of men, then we must look at Jesus and learn from Him. Jesus spent a large portion of each day thinking about people; helping people to become spiritually alive and stay spiritually well. The Apostle Paul followed the example of Jesus, which is why he could tell the believers at Corinth, in **I Corinthians 11:1-2**,

*“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. I praise you for . . . holding to the teachings [the words of life], just as I passed them on to you.”*

What Paul learned from Christ, he passed on to the believers at Corinth. The believers at Corinth were therefore responsible to pass the words of life on to others. Dr. Steven Collins states in his manual entitled, Christian Discipleship, that Christians are not fully behaving as disciples of Christ if we are not committed to making disciples for Christ. “But pastor Mark, we are not all called to be pastors or missionaries.” That is right, but we are all called to be disciples and make disciples. We are not all going to earn our living by doing this, but we can all be doing it in some manner.

Those of you who work alongside of unbelievers, have great opportunities to help them come to know Christ. As a pastor, I spend most of my time with believers. Some of my best opportunities of directly impacting unbelievers has been between pastorates, when I have worked side by side with them, eight hours a day, for five days a week.

I want to close this message by looking at a passage highlighted in our work book, Real-Life Discipleship, which speaks about the importance of being a disciple. The passage is **John 17:4-8**, and is a recorded prayer of Jesus to God the Father, just before He died on the cross for our sins,

*“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.<sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began [Jesus was about to die, rise from the dead and ascend back to the Father’s right hand. But there is something extremely important that Jesus said He had accomplished even before dying on the cross].<sup>6</sup> I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world [Jesus is speaking about His disciples who had followed Him for three years]. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word [by following Christ].<sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.<sup>8</sup> For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.”*

We have already established that we cannot be a genuine disciple of Christ if we do not believe and embrace that He is the eternal Son of God. All of Christ’s 12 disciples, except for Judas Iscariot, who played a different role in God’s plan, believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and were willing to follow Him, and allow Him to make and shape them into fishers of men. That was a hugely important part of Christ’s mission upon the earth. And He has passed that mission on to each of us who are disciples of Christ.

We can all agree that the most important part of Jesus’ mission was to die for our sins, rise from the dead, ascend back to the Father and then commission the Holy Spirit to regenerate and make holy all who come to Christ. But if Jesus had not made those disciples, who would have told the world about the real Jesus and what He has accomplished for ruined sinners? It would not have been the large crowds that followed Jesus to see His miracles, because they did not embrace Him as their Lord and King. And so how are unbelievers today going to learn about the real Jesus, if Christians do not live the gospel and share the gospel with them? Let’s pray.