

IS EVERY BELIEVER A DISCIPLE?

MATTHEW 4:18-22

Schutt Sports, a major supplier of football helmets for the National Football League, issues the following warning label on all their helmets and on their website's homepage: "WARNING NO HELMET SYSTEM CAN PREVENT CONCUSSIONS OR ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SERIOUS HEAD OR NECK INJURIES WHILE PLAYING FOOTBALL." The warning label continues with some information about the symptoms for concussions and concludes by repeating the original warning: "TO AVOID THESE RISKS, DO NOT ENGAGE IN THE SPORT OF FOOTBALL." At least Schutt Sports is utterly honest about the risks of playing football. In a similar way, the Bible is honest about the risks of following Jesus. In a way, the Bible says, "TO AVOID THE RISKS OF DISCIPLESHIP, DO NOT ENGAGE IN FOLLOWING JESUS." Of course the Bible also offers some amazing promises about the rewards of discipleship.

Today I want to begin a new message series on what it means to follow Jesus or, to put it another way, what it means to be a disciple. The Bible teaches that those words – "believer", "Christian", "disciple," and "follower" of Jesus - all mean the very same thing. I'm using a familiar saying of Jesus as the title for this message series: "Follow Me." It's about discerning Jesus' call to discipleship for today. That was the simple, straightforward invitation or command that Jesus gave numerous times. "Follow Me." Let's look at one example together. But Jesus repeated that statement several times. "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. 'Follow me and be my disciple,' Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him." (Mt 9:9 NLT)... "The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Come, follow me.'" (Jo 1:43 NLT)... "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." (Jo 10:27 NLT)... "Anyone who wants to serve me must follow me, because my servants must be where I am. And the Father will honor anyone who serves me." (Jo 12:26 NLT) I begin this message series by asking a simple question: "Is every believer in Jesus a disciple of Jesus?" How would you answer that question? Let me suggest that we can only answer that question by asking and answering three other questions first. Here's the first one:

WHO IS A DISCIPLE?

It's a good idea to define what most people mean by a "believer." Most people think of a "believer" as another word for a Christian. A believer is a person who believes certain things about Jesus – that He's the Son of God, that He died on the cross for people's sins, and that He rose again from the dead. A believer also believes that if you, at some point in time, ask forgiveness of your sins and accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior that you will then go to Heaven when you die and live there forever. Well and good. I believe you can find justification for all of that in the Bible.

So, when you hear the word "disciple", how would you define it? Many of us recognize it as the word or term that refers to the twelve men Jesus selected early in His ministry to travel around with Him. They were Jesus' disciples. For a period of about three years, He taught them many things and they witnessed many miracles. After Jesus

ascended back to Heaven, the disciples became the first leaders of those who became believers in Jesus. Now, the disciples were called apostles. Perhaps just for that very reason many of us associate the word “disciple” with a kind of elevated group of Christians. Are there “disciples” of Jesus today? Most Christians would say yes, but many of them unconsciously believe that disciples today are super or elite Christians – followers of Jesus who read the Bible and pray every day, who tell people about Jesus frequently, or who serve as pastors, missionaries, or church leaders.

The Greek word which is translated into English as "disciple" appears 231 times in the Gospels, 23 times in the Acts of the Apostles, and not at all in either the Epistles or the Book of Revelation. It was actually a very common word back in Jesus' day. It was used to identify a learner or follower of any great teacher or leader. For instance, we're told that John the Baptist had disciples. It was never a word exclusively associated just with Jesus. And, yes, it was most definitely used numerous times to refer to the twelve men chosen by Jesus. But, did you know, that the very same word is used in the Bible to describe the larger, growing group of people who became followers of Jesus?

Here's a few examples: “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing...” (Acts 6:1 NLT)... “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7 NLT)... “When he (Paul) came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (Acts 9:26 NLT)... “So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” (Acts 11:26 NLT)... “They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned..., strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.” (Acts 14:21-22 NLT) An important conclusion is easy to make. From the earliest days of the church, there was a deliberate association of the word "disciple" with all other words used to describe a follower of Jesus: "Christian", "saint", "believer", or "brother" or "sister in Christ". Is every believer a disciple? If the question is about how those words are used in the Bible, there's only one possible answer: Yes!

When Jesus and the leaders of the early church in the New Testament spoke of disciples, with the exception of those who were later identified as apostles, they had in mind just normal, everyday Christians not some spiritually elite group of believers. That being said, I suggest that many American Christians don't equate their faith in Jesus with being His disciple. They think a disciple is some kind of advanced Christian. They'd prefer to think of themselves as “believers” or “Christians.” Being called a disciple connotes a level of commitment and dedication to Jesus that makes some of us uncomfortable. But, yes, by definition, if you're a believer in Jesus, then you are a disciple of Jesus. Well, that just leads to a second question....

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

The word “discipleship” doesn't appear in the Bible at all. “Disciple”, yes, over 250 times, but not “discipleship.” So, what does it mean? Here's a simple definition to get

us started: "We might define discipleship as becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ." (George Barna) Sometimes, it helps to understand what something is by explaining what it isn't. So, here is what discipleship is not. It's not a program. In other words, it's not a course of study, a curriculum, or a class you take a test in and graduate from. Yes, you can learn how to study the Bible and learn how to share your testimony with others – which are great discipleship tools – but discipleship itself is bigger than and beyond some set program. Discipleship is not just for beginners. Sure, a new Christian needs some basic training, but you never outgrow the need for training. Great basketball players continue to practice the fundamentals of their sport: dribbling, passing, shooting, rebounding. That's how they keep on being great basketball players. Christian disciples who take discipleship seriously continue to do things like study the Bible, pray faithfully, and share Jesus with others. They stay in shape spiritually.

But, discipleship isn't just for leaders either. Each and every believer is called to follow Jesus for the rest of his or her life which will by necessity demand growth, development, and transformation. Being a disciple of Jesus is both the starting point and the goal of being a believer in Jesus. Discipleship is not just for intellectuals. Most of the people who have loved and served Jesus down through church history could neither read nor write. But they figured out how to follow Jesus effectively in their day and time, nevertheless. Here's an important "not." Discipleship is not about trying to be perfect. You and I can't ever be perfect. That option ended on the first day of life because the Bible says we were born with a strong tendency towards sin called a sin nature. The original disciples – meaning the twelve men who followed Jesus – were always screwing up and Jesus was always having to correct them. Trying to be perfect is the pursuit of an absolute fool and only reveals that you don't begin to understand God's absolute holiness and goodness.

So, then, what is discipleship? Again, here's a straightforward definition: "We might define discipleship as becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ." (George Barna) But, let's fill out the picture a bit more. First, discipleship is a lifelong rather than an occasional effort. It began the moment you put your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and will continue until the moment you step over the threshold of Heaven itself. You will never live one day in this life when following Jesus is not a factor of some kind. Second, discipleship is a gradual process rather than a once-and-done event. I believe there are times when we can be unconscious of what the Holy Spirit is doing in our minds and hearts. By the same token, I don't think there's ever a moment when God is not doing something to draw us closer to Himself. Wouldn't it be interesting if you grew physically in once-and-done events? Can you imagine, just seeing someone shoot up six inches just like that! Instead, you grow physically very gradually, and that's how it happens spiritually, too.

Third, discipleship is a comprehensive transformation of my life rather than just small, random changes. That word "transformation" gets to the heart of discipleship. It means change at every level of your life. The Bible says, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way

you think....” (Rom 12:2 NLT) Spiritual transformation means moving from the person you are without Jesus towards the new person you are in Jesus. “...And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.” (2 Cor 3:18 NLT) Pagan religions back in Jesus’ day made no connection between belief in a certain god and your personal behavior. Who or what you believed in wasn’t supposed to change you. Not so with being Jesus’ disciple! “...throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.” (Eph 4:22-24 NLT)

Transformation of your mind means believing what Jesus believed. Transformation of your character means living in the way Jesus lived. Transformed relationships means loving other people as Jesus loved others. Transformed leadership meant serving others for Jesus; it will come to mean the same for you. Discipleship is a kind of transformation that encompasses every conceivable area of your life: your job, your career, your marriage, your parenting, your retirement, everything. I love this quote by Christian author and philosopher, Dallas Willard, “... I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did.”

And, then, discipleship is an intentional, Holy Spirit-directed effort to imitate Jesus rather than an accidental, no effort approach to spiritual growth. Paul once wrote these words, “And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.” (1 Cor 11:1 NLT) Elsewhere, Peter wrote, “...He (Jesus) is your example, and you must follow in his steps.” (1 Pt 2:21 NLT) You can’t imitate anyone or follow someone accidentally. Imitation demands intentionality. You can’t even try to imitate Jesus without some personal effort involved, but discipleship is personal effort energized by the Holy Spirit. OK, so here might be the most important question yet to be asked and answered....

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Truth be told, in Europe and the United States, the dominant brand of Christianity today is non-discipleship Christianity. What is non-discipleship Christianity? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and martyr for Jesus in Nazi Germany wrote, “...Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” First, non-discipleship Christianity reduces the Gospel to managing my sin. It’s mostly about how to get your sins forgiven so you can go to Heaven when you die. “Just come forward, pray a prayer, and get baptized. Then you’re in! Yes, there should be transformation in your life, but it’s not required. Only serious Christians pursue and practice discipleship; grace and forgiveness is enough for everyone else.” And following Jesus is mostly about coming back to Jesus every now and then to get additional sins forgiven. Grace is often reduced to just getting our sins forgiven, not so much enabling us to become like Jesus, or live a godly life, or do good works that glorify God.

Second, non-discipleship Christianity separates justification from sanctification. Justification is about being born again by putting your trust in Jesus. Sanctification is

becoming like Jesus. Of course, they're different, but they should never be separated. The Gospel is both an invitation and a demand. The invitation is "Believe!" The demand is "Change!" If you haven't heard both the invitation to believe in Jesus as well as the demand that you change to become like Jesus, you haven't ever truly heard the good news! Third, non-discipleship Christianity teaches saving faith is agreeing with a set of religious facts. "Just believe Jesus died and rose again for you. That's all you need to do." Really? Let me ask you: Can a person go to Heaven who is not a disciple of Jesus? Many Christians would say, "Sure! Just believe. Just being a believer is enough." But in the Bible, that kind of Christianity just doesn't exist. The problem is that we've proclaimed a kind of faith that doesn't transform anyone! Bonhoeffer was exactly right: "...Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."

Here's another reason it matters. There's a lot of confusion out there over what it means to be a Christian. Many Christians now accept and encourage a kind of two level Christian experience where only a few, serious followers of Jesus pursue and practice discipleship while everyone else is content to settle for grace, forgiveness, and Heaven when he or she dies. As a result, there is without a doubt a vast throng of people in our country who think they are Christians, believers, saved, born again people when they are not. I love how Greg Ogden puts it, "Being a Christian is easy. The only thing required is that we acknowledge our need of a savior and to receive a gift that I cannot earn or deserve. But if I identify myself as a disciple, then I am making a statement about the quality of my followership. Being a Christian is a statement about what Christ has done for me; being a disciple is a statement about what I am doing for Christ." A believer is a disciple. A disciple is a believer. It's just that some are obedient, growing disciples, and others are not.

Here's a final thought on why all of this matters. A return to discipleship Christianity might well revitalize plateaued and declining churches. Researchers tell us that 75% - 80% of the 340,000 churches in our country are plateaued or declining despite the fact that our population is growing. Our church is one of those churches. My Doctor of Ministry studies, which are coming to an end this year, have provided the opportunity to gain insight into why and how churches plateau and decline as well as exposure to all the theories and opinions as to what prompts a congregation to turnaround. Sure, some churches decline because of demographic changes over which they have no control. I believe that's part of our story here at KRBC. By the same token, some churches grow for a while because they put on a better Sunday morning "dog and pony" show than other churches around them. Their "revitalization" is short lived. I long to see our church turnaround simply because we're doing what Jesus said we should do. "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20 NLT)

Many of you know that George Bullard, a church consultant who visited our congregation in 2013, recommended that we focus intentionally on head of household discipleship and disciple-making. After prayer, thought and discussion last year, our

staff, our volunteer leaders, and I have taken that advice to heart. We've begun the task of creating a discipleship culture in our church. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen. We've contracted with The Navigators ministry to coach us and to help us over time develop that culture in an intentional and focused way. Bill Mowry from The Navigators will be here at our Family Gathering on Sunday, January 25 at 9:00 in the Fellowship Hall to tell all of us more about what that looks like. Our Long Range Planning Ministry Team has evolved into a discipleship leadership and learning team that will guide us along the way. I want to tell you who these good people are so you can be praying for them. They didn't know I was going to do this. Some of them might not even be here today, but I just want them to stand as I introduce them: Sean Billingslea, Cheryl Breusch, Mike Etherington, Stephen Evans, Zach Held, Kathy Jasinski, Carol Kirn, Jeff Lashley, Sharon Merz, Lola Powell, Michelle Prindle, and from our staff, Beth Ash, Aimee Worley, Aaron Joiner, and myself. May I ask all of you to do something for this group? Pray for us. Pray for us. Pray for us.

Back on Earth Day in 1971, the organization, Keep America Beautiful, launched what was called one of the fifty greatest TV commercials of all time. The one-minute ad featured a Native American man paddling down a junk-infested river, surrounded by smog, pollution, and trash. The camera then panned to the Indian's cheerless face just as a single tear rolls down his cheek. That image of the crying Indian became iconic. The ad's performer was a man called Iron Eyes Cody and he became the face of Native Americans for a while. Iron Eyes was honored with a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. Long before his fame in the 1970s, Iron Eyes Cody was featured as an Indian in several Western films alongside actors like John Wayne and Ronald Reagan. By all accounts, he was Hollywood's—and America's—favorite Native American. But several real Native American actors soon came to doubt Iron Eyes' authenticity. Then a reporter visited Iron Eyes Cody's hometown and made a startling discovery: both his parents were full-blooded Italians. How did he fake his real identity for so long? Apparently the residents of his hometown in Louisiana were too invested in supporting their successful local boy. Hollywood, along with the ad agencies that profited from his image, relied on his false image. Even after his history was revealed, old Iron Eyes Cody refused to admit the truth. He continued to wear a braided wig, Indian chief headdress, and moccasins. He kept talking about his connection to "the Great Spirit."

Is every believer a disciple? The Bible makes no distinction. There are so-called Christians who look just like followers of Jesus. But to be a follower of Jesus – a true believer in Jesus – you must also be His disciple. Are you a disciple? Not just a Christian... not just a believer... but a disciple? Like Iron Eyes Cody, are you pretending to be someone or something that you are not? Are you the real deal?