



I. Disciple or Believer

Are you a disciple or just a believer? That may be a life-changing question for you. Too many Christians have settled for being just believers. They have plateaued at a lower level than Jesus intended when He gave the Great Commission to *“Go therefore and make disciples ... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you,”* Matthew 28:19-20. Too many Christians have spiritual development that falls significantly short of their chronological spiritual age. In simple terms, time has passed but they have not grown up. This is not new. The author of Hebrews wrote, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant ... therefore leaving the elementary teaching ... let us press on to maturity,”* Hebrews 5:12 - 6:1. Too many Christians are not spiritually mature. Many could not even define the attributes of spiritual maturity. The purpose of Acts One Eight is neither to document this problem nor to criticize and condemn. Its purpose is to equip believers to press on to maturity ... to grow up into disciples and disciplemakers.

Do you know the differences between a disciple and a believer? You may think that those terms are synonymous. However, they are not synonymous. Jesus made that perfectly clear. Every disciple is a believer. However, not every believer is a disciple. It is too simplistic to think that a disciple is just a more serious version of a believer. A disciple is more than a believer with the contrast, brightness, and volume turned up. It is true that disciples, when compared to believers, are more disciplined in their Bible study, prayer, witnessing, non-conformity to the world, giving to the work of God, and other aspects of their walk with God. However, it is much more than that. God's Word gives us these four distinctions of a disciple: (1) abiding in the Word, (2) loving other disciples, (3) bearing fruit, and (4) paying the price to follow Jesus.

Distinction 1: Abiding in His Word, John 8:31-32. Jesus declared that abiding in His Word is a primary requirement for being His disciple. His words, *“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,”* John 8:32, is often taken out of context for use in evangelism. That verse is not about salvation. It is about being a disciple. Look at the context. John 8:30 states, *“many came to believe in Him.”* Then Jesus spoke directly to believers rather than to the unsaved. He spoke *“to those Jews who had believed Him,”* and He said to them, *“if you continue in (abide in) My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,”* John 8:31-32. Abiding is much more than visiting His Word once a week or even once a day. It is living in, being rooted in, His Word. You must know and live in His Word to be His disciple. A Christian who does not know and abide in His word is just a believer. Do you really know His Word?

Is your life rooted in His Word? Do you abide in His Word or are you just a visitor? Make the commitment to know His Word and to abide in His Word.

Distinction 2: Loving one another, John 13:35. This is another essential requirement for being His disciple. Jesus said, *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,"* John 13:35. The word translated in that verse as love is the word for unconditional love in Greek. It is the word *agape* rather than the word *phileo*. The word *phileo* indicates the brotherly love or friendship. *Agape* love brings with it unlimited co-liability. Friendship does not go as far as unlimited co-liability. Disciples truly love one another in deed and in truth. They consider each other more important than themselves. That level of love, exemplified by Jesus, openly identifies them in the world as His disciples. However, too many Christians love one another in word but not in deed. *Agape* love is more than meeting together in rows in a church sanctuary or in a classroom circle. It is more than meeting together in a home as part of a small group. Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one as He and the Father are one and that they might be one so that the world might know that the Father sent Him into the world, John 17:11, 21-23. That oneness comes from *agape* love. It comes from the distinctive love that disciples have for one another in lives connected to each other in a community of disciples. Jesus said, *"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you,"* John 15:12-14.

Distinction 3: Bearing fruit, John 15:8. This is a primary requirement for becoming and being His disciple. Simply stated, a disciple bears fruit. A fruitless disciple is a contradiction of terms. A fruitless Christian is just a believer. Jesus said, *"By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples,"* John 15:8. The word translated from Greek as "prove" in that verse means more than to appear as ... it means to become, to come into existence, to begin to be, or to be made. An appropriate translation of that verse could be, *"By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so become My disciples."* What is the fruit? From the context of John 15, the fruit includes the new believers and disciples that are produced through our lives. Jesus said in John 15 that we are to bear fruit, more fruit, much fruit, and fruit that remains. Galatians 5:19-25 describes the fruit of the Spirit rather than the fruit of the believer. Galatians 5 describes the personality characteristics of the Spirit manifested in the believer's life as he or she lives by and walks in the Spirit. The fruit of John 15 is the fruit of the believer (the branch) abiding in Jesus (the vine). The branch abiding in the vine and bearing fruit is the believer becoming His disciple. The Apostle Paul was eager to preach the Gospel in Rome being under obligation, eager, and not ashamed. He desired to bear fruit among them, Romans 1:13-17. Are you driven like Paul? Do you desire that lost people come to the Savior through you? Do you want to be part of the fruit-bearing process? Do you want to bear much fruit, and so become His disciple? By bearing fruit, you can become and be His disciple.

Distinction 4: Following Him at great cost, Luke 14:25-35. Believers come to Jesus. Disciples then follow after Him. The cost for someone to come to Jesus (become a believer) was fully paid by Jesus. The cost for following after Jesus (being His disciple) is paid by the one who follows. It is costly to follow Jesus. It is costly to be His disciple. Paying the price is a requirement for His disciples. Jesus defined the cost in Luke 14:25-33. In the first three verses, we see two types of peo-

ple among those who were going along with Him ... those who come to Him, and those who could come after Him (i.e. if they follow Him). Disciples do more than come to Him. They follow after Him. They pay the price to follow the One who paid the ultimate price for them.

The cost in relationships. The first cost is stated in verses 25-26 as, "*If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.*" Sometimes the word "hate" in the Bible means hate in the literal sense. However, in many Bible occurrences, it means strong preference or choice. That latter usage is in Genesis 29:30-31 where a preference is clearly stated about Jacob's love as, "*he loved Rachel more than Leah.*" Then Jacob's lesser love is referred to as hate in the literal words of verse 31, "the Lord saw that Leah was unloved" (i.e. hated in Hebrew). A father who disciplines his son loves him more than a father who does not discipline his son. "*He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently,*" Proverbs 13:24. In describing God's choice of Jacob over Esau, the same comparative use of the word hate is used. "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,*" Romans 9:13. Jesus used such a comparison in saying, "*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me,*" Matthew 10:37. Jesus made it clear that His disciples must put Him first above their own families or they cannot be His disciples. There must be such a disparity between our love for Him and our love for those in our families that our love for them seems relatively like hate. When a legitimate choice between family and Jesus must be made, a disciple chooses Jesus. Be encouraged by His promise, "*Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life,*" Luke 18:29-30.

The self-cost. Jesus stated that disciples must put Him above themselves, Luke 14:26. They must love Him so much more than they love themselves, that their love of self could be described as hate. This self-denial is an integral part of a disciple's life, Acts 20:24, Revelation 12:11. Jesus said, "*Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple,*" Luke 14:27. Carrying one's cross is more than bearing some moderately difficult burden through life as the phrase can mean in common usage. The seriousness of carrying one's cross is seen in the example of Jesus carrying His cross on the way to Golgotha. Jesus despised its shame, Hebrews 12:2. Six trials had exhausted Him. He was weakened by His tormenters' abuse ... beaten, whipped, and with thorns driven into His scalp. He struggled carrying the heavy cross through the narrow streets and mocking crowd ... stumbling under its weight. Most of us will probably not carry a literal cross as Jesus did. However, carrying your cross, as His disciple, will involve your own version of His humiliation, shame, reproach, and suffering, 2 Corinthians 4:10, Hebrews 13:13. To carry your own cross is to be treated as He was treated ... to suffer in self-denial as He suffered. Without carrying your own cross, you cannot be His disciple. Are you carrying your cross? Are you willing to carry your cross?

A costly decision. Notice the emphatic negative exclusion "*cannot be My disciple*" used in both Luke 14:26 and 27 of the one who will not pay the price to follow Him. This strict requirement does not exclude someone from being saved ... but definitely excludes the uncommitted one from being His disciple. Jesus gave two illustrations of making a costly decision ... one of a man building a tower and one of a king going to war. The life of the Christian is like that ... building on the foundation of salvation ... and going to battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. The tower-builder illustration is of a man who should decide before starting if he has enough to complete the project. "*For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish,'*" Luke 14:28-30. Every believer who desires to become a disciple needs first to decide about paying the price to complete the project. That decision is a Romans 12:1 type of commitment. A believer who does not become a disciple is an unfinished tower. Many Christians are mocked and ridiculed. Much of that is legitimate persecution ... the world's persecution of Jesus through them. However, some of it may be because they are unfinished towers ... and all who observe them begin to ridicule them, saying, "*They began to build and were unable to finish.*" The second illustration is that of a king going to war against an enemy outnumbering his own army by a 2-to-1 advantage. "*Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace,*" Luke 14:31-32. That king should first decide if he is strong enough to win. David went to war against the humanly bigger and stronger Goliath. The fearful army of Israel would not fight. Nevertheless, David decided that he could win because he was on the side of the living God. If the Luke 14 king decides that he cannot win, he should send a delegation to ask for terms of peace. In reality, that is no more than surrender. That is the picture of too many believers today ... surrendering to the enemies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. They compromise with the enemy for terms of peace ... they surrender. Jesus used the tower builder and the king as illustrations for our need to make a second decision ... a decision to pay the full price of following after Him as His disciples. The need for a second decision (after the first decision of salvation) is of foremost importance for a believer who wants to be a disciple. Believers who aspire to be disciples need to offer a one-time decisive sacrifice of themselves as living and holy sacrifices, acceptable to God, Romans 12:1. Then they can press on to pay the full price to complete their tower ... to press on to victory in the war.

A disciple's open hand. Jesus continued to explain the cost as, "*So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions,*" Luke 14:33. Some believers misinterpret Luke 14:33 because the world has conformed them to think materialistically. What are your most prized human possessions? If your answer includes house, car, boat, jewelry, wide-screen TV, computer, or smart phone, then you have been conformed to this world. Your most prized human possessions include your family relationships ... those Jesus said you must renounce to be His disciple. Your own life is a prized human possession ... one that Jesus said you must renounce

to be His disciple. Additionally, a life of personal peace (without humiliation, shame, and suffering) is a prized human possession ... one that you must renounce when you take up your cross to follow Him. Actually, the words for "*his own possessions*" do not appear in the Greek of Luke 14:33. Translators added those three words for clarity ... but conformity to the world blurs their meaning of possessions. That verse might be clearer if you disregard those three words. In addition, in that verse, the words translated as *give up* do not mean *give away* ... but rather mean *renounce your claim to* ... i.e., *transfer title and ownership to God*. Verse 33 could be accurately paraphrased as, "none of you can be my disciple who does not renounce all claims to human relationships, self, and possessions." All that you hold dear must be laid on His altar if you want to be His disciple. Do not clutch those people, your life, or anything else in your fist. Place all that you hold dear on His altar with an open hand. If He takes it away, that is fine. If He leaves it (or part of it) in your open hand, that is fine too. Be a good steward of what He leaves there. Know that you have it all on loan, in your open hand, for His glory.

What will you decide to be? Every believer must choose what to do about being a disciple. There is a high price associated with following after Him ... with becoming and being His disciple. Paying the price begins with a second decision after salvation to finish the tower ... a decision to win the war. Individually, each believer should sit down or get on his or her knees ... and decide. What about you? Will you pay the price to become His disciple? Are you willing to finish building your tower? Are you committed to win when humanly outnumbered by the world, the flesh, and the devil? Will you truly abide in His Word, love other disciples, and bear fruit? Will you put Him first above all others ... and above yourself? Will you renounce all for Him? All believers should make a one-time Romans 12:1 sacrifice ... putting themselves unconditionally and irreversibly on His altar. Do not settle for being just a believer. Jesus calls every believer to press on to be His disciple. That includes you. Make the commitment to become and be His disciple.

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