

## The Definition of Discipleship

In a sense, one could obtain a definition of discipleship simply by reading John 8:31 wherein Jesus said to *“to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.’* Basically *“disciple”* comes from the word *mathetes* (Gk) which literally indicated *“thought accompanied by endeavor”* (**Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, by Vine). And this idea is suggested in the expression just cited — *“certain Jews believed Him”* (referring to Jesus). The fact that they *“believed Him”* implies the presence of thought, and they were to *“abide”* in His word, which denotes action. Hence, a disciple of Jesus is one who has learned of Him through study, and they *“abide”* in His *“word”* (**do** what He has commanded).

More could be said regarding the definition of discipleship if one undertook an exhaustive study of the word by turning to various dictionaries, lexicons, and to other word study materials. However, most people do not long remember the mere definition of a word. They are more impressed with **illustrations** than by definitions. In fact, we sometimes have trouble grasping a definition which is not accompanied with an illustration.

Our Lord, the Master Teacher, knew the value of using simple, every day events in order to get across some profound lessons. He took this approach in the conversation recorded in John 12:20-26 which reads as follows: (20) *“Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. (21) Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, ‘Sir we wish to see Jesus.’ (22) Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. (23) But Jesus answered them, saying, ‘The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. (24) Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much grain. (25) He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (26) If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.’”*

Having read the preceding verses (John 8:31-32; John 20:2-26), it now behooves us to examine them in greater detail. Basically, they contain: (a) A Request, (b) A Response, and © A Reply.

### The Request

*“Certain Greeks”* (probably Gentile proselytes) came to Philip *“and asked him, saying, Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”* No doubt, in view of the many marvelous works Jesus had done His name had been noised about. That, coupled with His raising Lazarus from the dead in the preceding chapter, and His triumphal entry into Jerusalem in this chapter (John 12:12-19), had aroused the curiosity of those Greeks who wished *“to see Jesus.”*

However, with the complete body of truth having now been revealed in His New Testament, we can readily see the wisdom of their request. When they were endeavoring to *“see Jesus,”* they were seeking to see: (1) The brightest display of divine glory, John 1:14, (2) the clearest manifestation of divine perfection, John 14:9, (3) the *“one mediator between God and men,”* I Tim. 2:5, (4) the location of *“all spiritual blessings,”* Eph. 1:3, and (5) the only *“way”* to heaven, John 14:6. The marvel of the age is not that these Greeks wanted to *“see Jesus.”* The real marvel is that so few people now, relatively speaking, manifest any real interest in the Jesus of the New Testament!

### The Response:

*“Philip came and told Andrews, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus,”* v. 22. No mention is made as to why these “Greeks” first approached Philip, nor why Philip then went to Andrew. Many commentators have observed that Philip and Andrew were the only disciples whose names were of Greek origin. Thus, the coming of these Greeks to Philip, and of Philip then going to Andrew, and their together going to Jesus would seem to be the most natural course to follow.

### **The Reply:**

Jesus answered, saying, *“The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified,”* v. 23. Earlier in this book (John 7:39) Jesus said *“the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”* According to Acts 2, the Holy Spirit, in baptismal measure, was given to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. And this was after Jesus had died, been raised from the tomb, ascended to heaven, and seated upon the right hand of the Father. Hence, when Jesus referred to the hour coming when *“the Son of Man should be glorified,”* He referred to His death and all the wondrous events that would follow, to the point of His glorified position in heaven.

Then in verses 24-26 Jesus mentioned wheat falling into the ground, the importance of people showing more regard for eternal life than for physical life, and the fact that the heavenly Father will “honor” those who “serve” Jesus. On first consideration, one may wonder what connection these items have with the initial request, that being *“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”*

But upon further consideration it becomes obvious that it is through these things that we are enabled to “see Jesus,” for: (1) The **seed** that dies in order to give life to the plant that springs up afterwards is suggestive of what **Jesus** did for us, Heb. 2:9; John 10:11), (2) The **individual** who loves the Father’s will more than his own life in the flesh is but a faint representation of **Christ** Who, according to the will of God, gave **His** life that **we** might have eternal life, and (3) He who serves and follows Christ is simply following the example of Christ Who served and followed God the Father. Hence, Jesus answered the expressed desire to “see” Him by revealing that it was one thing to “see” His physical form, and another to “see” Him in the sense of **His sacrificial** part in our redemption, and **our obedient part** in the sense of serving Him even if we have to lose our lives in the process.

### **Discipleship**

The real definition (and illustration) of discipleship is herein given. Jesus said *“unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain,”* John 12:24. The point Jesus was making is this: the seed that bears fruit is the seed that **first has to die**. Every farmer knows that as long as the grain of wheat is preserved from harm in the safe enclosure of the granary, it cannot bear fruit — it can only take up space. But when it is planted into the ground something wonderful takes place. Surrounded by moisture and warmth in its earthen grave, the whole body of the grain dies — except the germ of life within. And it then goes to work! It produces a plant, and the plant produces more seeds just like the seed that died. You see, the seed had **to die** in order to **produce life**. And that is what discipleship is all about!

### **We Must Die!**

To be a disciple of Jesus one has to die. Jesus, in doing the will of God, had to die to make our spiritual life possible. And we, in doing the will of Christ must also die! But to what must we die?

**(1) We must die to sin.** This takes place in scriptural baptism when the penitent believer puts off the “old man” of sin which is “*crucified with Him,*” and rises therefrom to “*walk in newness of life,*” Rom. 6:1-11. Christ died for sin, yours and mine. And we must die “*to sin.*”

**(2) We must die to Self.** I am glad God did not make free moral agents of wheat seed, thereby granting each seed the power of choice as to whether it would die to produce life, or stay in the granary to enjoy life. In a sense wheat seed must die to self in order to produce life. And so must we! Note the words of Paul in Gal. 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” On first reading, this verse sounds strange! Paul began by saying “I have been crucified with Christ” (a term which means death in some sense). But then he said “I live,” only to further say “it is longer I who live.” Thus far, Paul has basically said (a) I am dead, (b) I live, and © “it is no longer I who live.” Yes, this does sound strange — until we read the remainder of the verse. Paul said “it is no longer **I** who live, but **Christ lives in me.**” Therefore he could conclude by saying, “**the life** which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

The Greek word for “I” is *ego*; hence, Paul in substance said “my ego is destroyed; I no longer live in order to satisfy and gratify self; I live in order to please Christ Who died to save me.

And this is what discipleship is all about. When we die **to sin** and die **to self** we demonstrate what it means to follow Jesus Who died for us and totally surrendered His will to God so that **God** might be glorified and **we** can be saved. This is why the apostles could keep going after so much bitter persecution. This is why early Christians refused to deny Christ even though they knew that many of them would be beaten, soaked with pitch, hung on crosses, be ignited and serve as flaming torches to light the gardens of Nero’s palace. They had died **to sin and to self!** Consequently, no sacrifice was too great in the cause of their blessed Savior Whose will had become their obsession.

Is it any wonder why the church grew so rapidly in those days? Christians knew the meaning of discipleship! And, through them, others were able to “see” Jesus.” Meanwhile nearly 21 centuries later, “Christians, “sitting on soft pews in air-conditioned buildings, often complain if the preacher goes five minutes “overtime.” And others, less faithful, are heard to say, “company came, so we couldn’t go to church.” And at the same time we wonder why more people are not being converted! Could it be that many of us have not learned what it really means to be a “**disciple**” of Jesus? —B. Witherington

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