



Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

Lesson 16: The Definition of and Need for Discipleship

INTRODUCTION

An important mark of a healthy church is a pervasive concern for church growth as growth is prescribed in the Bible. That means growing members, not just numbers. Some today think that a person can be a “baby Christian” for a whole lifetime. Growth is treated as an optional extra for zealous disciples. But growth is a sign of life. If a tree is alive, it grows. If an animal is alive, it grows. Being alive means growing, and growing means increasing and advancing, at least until death intercedes.

Paul hoped the Corinthians would grow in their faith (2 Cor. 10:15), and that the Ephesians would “grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ,” (Eph. 4:15; cf. Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:3). Peter exhorted his readers, “like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,” (1 Peter 2:2).

It is tempting for pastors and even some members to reduce their churches to manageable statistics of attendance, baptisms, giving, and membership. This kind of growth is tangible. Yet such statistics fall far short of the true growth that the New Testament authors describe and that God desires.¹

1. What comes into your mind when you think about “discipleship”? _____

MAIN IDEA

Discipleship means growing as followers of Jesus and helping others to do the same. Since none of us are perfect, we all need to grow as disciples of Christ. In this lesson we will look at the definition of discipleship and see why discipleship is needed for all in the church.

I. The Definition of Discipleship

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus calls people to leave everything and follow Him. Consider the following passages:

Matthew 4:18–20; 9:9; 16:24–25

John 12:25–26

¹ Mark Dever, “An Important Mark of a Healthy Church: Biblical Discipleship and Growth,” in *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 11.

1. Based on these passages, what does it mean to follow Jesus? List as many things as you can think of below. _____

2. Does following Jesus mean that we must leave our jobs or other responsibilities, as Peter, Andrew, and Matthew did? _____

3. According to these passages, is following Jesus easy? _____

All of us need to continually grow as followers of Jesus. Although there is certainly a point at which all of us first believed the gospel and submitted our lives to Christ, we are not true followers of Jesus if we simply made a “decision” at some point and our lives haven’t changed at all.

Rather, being Christians—disciples of Jesus—means that we constantly repent of sin, confess it, seek to overcome it, and do all that we can to grow in likeness to Christ. As Peter tells us, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). To be a follower of Jesus is to be always growing in following Jesus.

Let’s consider another passage of Scripture that helps to define discipleship. At the very end of the book of Matthew, Jesus gives His eleven disciples the charge which has come to be known as the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:18–20

4. What does Jesus say has been given to Him (v. 18)? What does that require of us? _____

5. What does Jesus command His disciples to do? How are they to do it (vv. 19–20)? _____

6. What encouragement does Jesus give us in this task of making disciples (v. 20)? _____

As we've seen in this passage, Jesus's followers are to obey all of His commands, which include this command to go and make disciples. This means that all disciples of Jesus are to work to make other disciples of Jesus, first by proclaiming the good news of the gospel to them, and then, for those who respond in faith, teaching them to do everything that Jesus has commanded. To be a follower of Jesus is to help others grow as followers of Jesus.

II. The Need for Discipleship

As we have seen, to be a disciple is to be a student, someone who learns from and imitates his teacher. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are all called to continually learn from Him and follow Him in every area of life. Practically speaking, this means that we need to realize that discipleship is a lifelong process. In this life, none of us is a finished product. We all need to continually progress as disciples.

In Philippians 3:8–11, Paul exclaims that everything that once caused him to be proud he now considers to have been a waste of time because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. He then explains why he has gladly lost all of that and more; it's allowed him to know Christ, to share in His sufferings, and to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:12–21

1. What does Paul say that he is not, and that he has not yet done (vv. 12–13)? _____

2. If this is how the apostle Paul viewed himself, what does that say about what our own attitudes toward ourselves should be? _____

3. What reason does Paul give for why he presses on to obtain a deeper knowledge of Christ (v. 12)? _____

4. What does this teach us about the basis and motivation for our growth as Christians? _____

5. What is the one thing that Paul does do (vv. 13–14)? _____

6. What kind of imagery does Paul use in verses 13 and 14? _____

7. What do verses 13 and 14 teach us about the kind of effort we should spend on growing as Christians? _

8. List everything Paul says is true of us as Christians in verses 20 to 21. _____

9. How does each of these things encourage us to persevere in our discipleship? _____

Small Group Discussion Questions

Read Matthew 28:18–20.

1. Do you think this passage applies to believers today, or was it only for the eleven disciples? Explain your answer from the text. _____

2. What are some things that could cause us to be discouraged as we seek to make disciples? How does Jesus's promise to be with us help us during those times? _____

3. We typically associate this passage with cross-cultural missions, which is certainly something that this passage requires. But is that this passage's only application? What do you think? _____

4. Do you think about every single area of your life through the lens of being a follower of Jesus? What is one area in your life in which you struggle to follow Jesus? _____

Here's one practical way for you to follow up on the last question. Do you know a believer who sets a godly example in the area of discipleship you struggle with?

- If so, ask if you can get together with this person and discuss this matter. God means for us to grow through the help of others.
 - If not, ask around at church until you find someone who does!
5. Have you considered that a normal part of being a follower of Jesus is helping others grow as followers of Jesus? What are some ways this truth should impact:
 - a) Your daily schedule? _____

 - b) How you approach going to church on Sunday? _____

 - c) Casual conversations with brothers and sisters in Christ? _____

Read Philippians 3:12–21.

6. Whom does Paul instruct us to imitate in verse 17? (Hint: There are two answers.) What does this teach us about how we are to grow as Christians? _____

7. How do you respond when a fellow believer corrects or rebukes you? What does this reveal about how you see yourself? _____

8. In this study we've seen that all of us need to continually grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, and that we are to do so by seeking out and imitating godly examples. Can you list one or two people who are worth being imitated? What Christlike qualities do you perceive in those individuals that are worth imitating? _____

9. Paul presents himself as an example to be imitated. A person could do this out of pride, but explain how one (like Paul) could also do this out of humility. _____

10. Is your life one which younger Christians should imitate? If not, do you work to become that kind of person? _____

11. What is one practical way you can seek to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ this week?² _____

² Bobby Jamieson, *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 15–17.