

TUTORIAL
7.19

Introduction to Discipleship

This tutorial introduces the fourth major area of the W.I.L.D. outline - *Discipleship* - and gives an overview from God's Word of the pattern of discipleship that is one of the major themes in God's Narrative.

Last Time

We thought about how God delights in diversity of *form* and seamlessly blends it with *function* to achieve the *fulfilment* He intends. Nowhere is this clearer than as we see Him building His Church. We considered too how growth towards maturity for believers includes discarding assumptions about how things "must" look in *form*. There are principles from God's Narrative about His perspective that come into focus in Acts and the Epistles which individuals and churches can learn to apply appropriately in their own time and place as they seek to *function* in light of God's purposes.

We also thought about how the ability to reproduce is a measure of health and maturity in all forms of life. Growth for disciples of Jesus involves an increasing willingness to give up their lives and to "die to self" in order to see His life reproduced in others. For churches, the commitment to His harvest should include a sense of responsibility for prioritising resources, also for equipping, caring for and guiding those who go out.

So far in Module 7 we've considered "W" for *Word*, "I" for *Identity* and "L" for *Life* as lenses through which we can project or observe spiritual health and maturity. Now, in the next few tutorials, we are going to consider the last of the four W.I.L.D. areas; "D" for *Discipleship*.

What is *discipleship*?

The English word *disciple* comes to us from the Latin *discipulus*, meaning "a learner" or "pupil". The equivalent term in the Greek of New Testament times is *mathētēs* from *manthanō* (to learn). So, obviously, the idea of learning is very closely associated with *disciple*, but as we'll see, this is not the only element of meaning encompassed by the term, either in its common usage when the New Testament was being written, or in the way Jesus and his apostles themselves used it. The term *discipleship* does not appear in English translations of

Scripture or indeed in most dictionaries, but it has come into common usage among Christians to describe both: (a) the relationship that exists between Jesus and His followers, and (b) the way that believers help each other in following Him. We trust that much more light will be shed on the terms *disciple* and *discipleship* as we continue.

Back in Tutorial 7.4, as we were introducing the W.I.L.D. outline, we made the point that we are not claiming any kind of inspiration for the four categories that we've used. We did explain that they've proved to be helpful and readily applicable in a wide variety of contexts, but their true validity is not based on field-testing or utility, but on whether they are categories that are grounded in the character of God; whether they are consistent with how He deals with humans; with who Jesus Christ is, and with what He is accomplishing in and through His Church. This area we're now going to trace out, *Discipleship*, is no exception. If you have made use of the AccessTruth Biblical Foundations tutorials you'll remember that a number of times through God's Narrative, we highlighted how from Creation onwards it has clearly been God's intention to have a relationship with human beings in which they look to Him for purpose, guidance and moral direction. This was to take place within the very real daily experience and responsibility of them functioning as overseers of His earthly creation.

Historical discipleship

After the Fall, it was against the backdrop of the plan of Redemption that He equipped, taught, guided and entrusted humans with responsibility, but His commitment didn't waver. The Narrative of the First Covenant is full of examples of Him "discipling" notable characters like Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David, and also many, many others we can think of. The equivalent Hebrew term *limmud*, is used only rarely, but the underlying ethos of discipleship is everywhere in the Old Testament. It's worth remembering that these teacher/learner relationships between God and individuals also extended to connections between humans in which individuals were disciplined to take over a particular role: e.g. Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha. It can also be said that God pursued a discipleship-like relationship with the nation of Israel, the very thing they corporately rejected when they insisted on a human monarchy to rule them. God then looked for that kind of relationship with the different kings, but it was only rare individuals - notably David - who responded in kind.

Time and space here don't allow us to do more than note in passing the historical and cultural dynamics that informed perceptions of the term *mathētēs* in New Testament times. Instances in Greek literature from the centuries before Christ included the idea of people becoming disciples of another culture, such as the Spartan way of life. It was a commitment that resulted in changes to their values and behaviour. There are also many

examples of people following significant masters as their disciples - philosophers such as Socrates or theoreticians like Pythagoras. Their *mathētai* (the plural form) often formed a close-knit community, learning from, adopting the perspectives, and often mimicking the mannerisms of their masters. The literature also contains mentions of individuals who were said to be a *mathētēs* of the gods: in other words, they closely aligned their beliefs and worldview to that of the gods of Greek mythology.

Judaism too, by the time of Christ, also had a number of different kinds of disciples, often called *talmidim* in Aramaic. These ranged from those who studied the Torah within a religious system like Pharisaism, followed a specific master such as Gamaliel, became adherents of one of the many prophet-type or messianic figures who rose up as popular leaders, or joined a separatist “remnant of Israel” movement such as the Qumran community, famous for copying the Scriptures down in what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Jesus’ view of discipleship

When John arrived on the scene, teaching his prophetic message of repentance, baptism and a life of obedience, he not only drew curious crowds to hear his preaching, but also some individuals who followed him as disciples. Given that his ministry was to prepare for the coming Messiah, it’s no surprise that some of those who’d go on to become Jesus’ first disciples started out by following John. The uniqueness of Jesus’ ministry and His call to discipleship were not immediately apparent to most as He began to gradually gain a following as a *rabbi* or teacher. Their perspective was shaped by their existing cultural categories for *master* and *disciple*, and also by their own worldview assumptions and commitments, and the degree to which their hearts were prepared. Many who followed did so for the wrong reasons, and even the eleven disciples who’d go on to become His apostles began with many incorrect expectations, which Jesus would increasingly challenge through His teaching and example, and even confront directly with them.

As word spread about Jesus’ teaching and particularly the miracles He was performing, large numbers of people began following Him from place to place. Some were responding to His message, but many were drawn by their curiosity, aspirations and hope that He would free them from the bondage of Roman occupation. Jesus’ call to follow Him was wide and inclusive; it crossed all boundaries of gender, class and ethnicity. It was “full of grace and truth”, and was “contextual”, in that it moved from commonalities to distinctives, from the known to the unknown. He engaged with Jewish, Old Testament kingdom aspirations but His teaching on the Kingdom of God challenged every assumption they held. He refused to let people’s personal or political agendas tame down His unique call to discipleship. Following Him would not be like following another rabbi, prophetic figure, political leader or movement. He was calling them to place their faith in Him as the Messiah, the only Way to God,

and to a life journey of full-on commitment to Him, no matter what the cost. As He clarified what being His disciple was all about, and as His message confronted existing worldview assumptions, it disappointed and even offended those who'd been following Him for the wrong reasons - an effect that was clearly intentional on His part (John 6:60-65).

Of course many times when the Gospel Narratives speak of "His disciples" they are referring to the twelve men who, in answer to His personal call, had left their careers and even their families for extended periods as they travelled with Him during His years of ministry. With the exception of Judas Iscariot, they had become convinced that the thirty-year-old man from Nazareth they were walking the roads of Palestine with was the Messiah, the "Holy One of God" who had "the words that give eternal life" (John 6:68-69).

The picture we're presented of these disciples that Jesus chose to be His apostles (Luke 6:13) is not of super saints or even of people who'd fully understood and submitted to all the implications of following Him from the start. They had responded to His invitation and then continued to follow Him, but it was His initiative and authority that formed the foundation for this relationship. They had no way of knowing from the outset where following Him would lead: it was His vision, His willingness to see the potential in them, His love that - in the words of 1 Corinthians 13:7 - never gave up, never lost faith, was always hopeful and endured through every circumstance. He graciously drew them along, challenging other loyalties and commitments that detracted from what *had to* become and indeed *did* become the primary relationship of their lives - being His disciples.

Careful, intentional, practical

The way Jesus went about preparing these apostles for the enormous task He would soon entrust to them was careful, intentional and practical. After speaking to the crowds He frequently spent time with the twelve explaining the Truth more fully. There are many instances of Him speaking to them as a group, but at other times He related to them individually, meeting them where they were at personally, building on strengths, speaking to their needs, confronting areas of blindness. The roads, fields, villages, encounters with people and events that took place during their time together formed the classroom in which He modelled and taught Truth. Sitting beside a vineyard became an opportunity to graphically illustrate that spiritual life and fruit is only possible through attachment to Him, the true "vine". The disciples arguing about their place in the Kingdom provided an opening to challenge their assumptions about greatness and being servants. A vicious storm on the lake became the context for a lesson in truly trusting Him as the all-powerful Creator. A conversation with a rich young man gave Him a chance to address the issue of materialism as an obstacle to true discipleship.

No doubt if we'd watched the disciples running away through the olive trees while Jesus was being arrested or, later, heard Peter, their normally bold spokesman, denying all knowledge of his Master by the fire at the High Priest's house, we would wonder if all Jesus' work with them had been in vain. But only hours before, knowing full well that they were about to temporarily abandon Him, Jesus had spoken lovingly and confidently about them to His Father. He was sending them (*apostello*) into the world, He said, in the same way *He* had been sent (John 17:18). Despite their very obvious human failings, He was confident that He had equipped them and that with God's help they would thrive.

Some seven weeks later, after Jesus' return to the Father, the Holy Spirit came to live in the apostles and continue what the Lord had begun. The Spirit's role was to help them understand and live out the implications of the Truth that Jesus had taught, and to give them the ability to go out and share the Good News that would call people into the same discipleship relationship they enjoyed with the Master.

Discipleship in the early Church

In the Church that the apostles had such a significant role in founding, the term *disciple* would become synonymous with *believer*. People in Jerusalem, the outlying areas of Israel, Samaria, Antioch, Galatia and Corinth - all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour - would also become His disciples. Increasingly, His new disciples were people who'd never seen Him with their own eyes or heard Him speak with their own ears. In fact, before long, many who now related to Him as His disciples did not even speak Greek or Aramaic. They were from other people groups with very different cultures and locations increasingly distant from Palestine. But through a chain of disciples, each sharing the Truth about the One who came and died and rose again, and then investing their lives in those who believed, more and more came to be His followers. This was the pattern He had established: genuine relationships that see the potential in others, that intentionally encourage them to grow in their discipleship relationship with Him, that look for every opportunity to draw them into His purposes, and that help them to equip themselves for His work.

The apostle Paul, although not one of that first group who'd travelled around with Jesus, was no less a disciple, and he provides us with the best example of a discipler in the early church. His commitment to the pattern of discipleship is summed up in his exhortation to the Corinthian believers to imitate him in the same way that he imitated Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul and those who worked with him most certainly preached the Truth, but it was not all just about the proclamation of the Gospel or teaching groups of believers. He would remind the Thessalonians that, "We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). For Paul it was matter of personally investing in individuals as much as it was a public ministry. In the same passage to the believers in Thessalonica he said,

“And you know that we treated each of you as a father treats his own children”
(1 Thessalonians 2:11).

Paul and Timothy

While ministering in what was effectively his home church in Antioch in Syria or during his extensive travels, Paul almost never worked on his own. In the New Testament Narrative he's most often seen functioning as part of a church planting and strengthening team that included some younger men he was investing time and energy into. Of course the outstanding example of Paul's commitment to discipleship was his friendship with a young believer, Timothy, from the town of Lystra. The apostle met him while travelling with Silas and Luke in modern day Turkey on what we know as his second missionary journey. He invited Timothy to travel with them as they moved on to encourage the newly planted churches in the area, and then kept going as far as Philippi in Greece, where Paul left Timothy with Silas to strengthen the brand new group of believers.

Over the next couple of decades their lives and ministries would intersect many times as they travelled together, or as Paul asked his junior co-worker to take on different responsibilities among the churches, most notably in Ephesus. This, of course, is where Timothy was helping to lead the church when Paul wrote the first of his letters we have recorded in the New Testament, addressed to his “true son in the faith”. The epistle includes many encouragements, exhortations and some very specific instructions that show how well Paul knew Timothy; also the sense of responsibility he took - and the freedom Timothy gave him - to speak into his life as his follower in the path of discipleship and as a discipler of others.

The second of these letters, again written from prison as Paul waits for his execution, is perhaps even more personal. He reminds Timothy of the spiritual gift he received from the Holy Spirit and encourages him to “fan the flames” of his initial experience (2 Timothy 1:6). He exhorts him to hold on to the way of teaching that Paul had shared and to carefully guard the Truth that had been entrusted to him (2 Timothy 1:13,14). And the pattern is to be repeated: the Truth that Paul has shared with him, Timothy is now to share with “other trustworthy people” (2 Timothy 2:2). And repeated again, because then they can, in turn, pass it on to others.

It's obvious that a pattern of discipleship is one of the major themes in God's Narrative: we've traced its presence right from Creation, after the Fall, through the Old Covenant times, during Jesus' life and ministry, the coming of the Spirit and then as the early Church reached out. As we picture future involvement in sharing Truth somewhere, as we evaluate proposed strategies, or if we're in a situation of evaluating the current impact of God's Word, the question of how effectively discipleship is taking place should always be a critical issue for us. The following tutorials will introduce the five questions under “D” for

Discipleship and hopefully give us some further insights as we consider how this plays out in real contexts.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Introduction to Discipleship

1. Looking at the flow of God's Narrative, note some of the outstanding discipleship-like relationships that existed between God and individuals. What common threads with these can you trace to Jesus' discipleship when He was on earth? What are some of the factors that constitute the differences between those Old Testament relationships and us following Jesus as His disciples today?
2. Describe anything you care to about your experience and current perspective of your discipleship relationship with Jesus.
3. Can you identify any human relationships in which you have been discipled? What did those look like? Was there any intentionality about them? Were they defined in some way? Did they have any specific objectives, e.g. for a particular role?