

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

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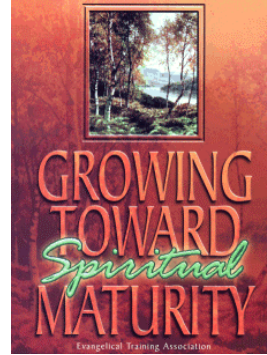
Becoming a Disciple of Jesus Christ

Chapter 2 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

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Before we begin to understand how to become something, we must have a clear picture of what it is that we want to become. This chapter describes first what a disciple is; then, what it means to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.



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What Is a Disciple?

The word *disciple* comes from the Greek word *mathetes*, meaning “learner, pupil, follower, or apprentice.” This same Greek root is used for *math*, meaning “to learn.” Thus, *mathematics* is understood to mean “thought accompanied by endeavor.”¹ To become a disciple, therefore, means to follow someone and to learn from the person. An apprenticeship involves imitating one’s master teacher. The process of how we learn or how we become like another person is at the very heart of the process of becoming a disciple.

Scripture uses the term *disciple* in different ways, depending on the context. At least eight different uses of the term are found throughout in the Old and New Testaments:

1. *Followers of a leader*—Various leaders like Moses, John the Baptist, rabbis, Pharisees, and Jesus (John 1:35–37).
2. *Various types of followers of Jesus*—The gospel writers describe general followers (Luke 6:13), serious believers (John 9:27), Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57), Ananias (Acts 9:10), Dorcas (Acts 9:36), and large groups of interested seekers (Luke 6:17).
3. *The Apostles*—Often used in a formal sense to mean “the Twelve” specially chosen leaders that Jesus appointed to be closest to Him and to lead the Great Commission after His death, resurrection, and ascension (Luke 6:13).
4. *Superficial, shallow, or simply curious followers*—People with a casual level of commitment to Jesus. When He says something they do not like, they leave Him. In this case, the usage may be similar to students in a modern classroom who are physically present in class but not serious about learning (John 6:60, 64, 66, 71).

5. *Known traitors with false motives*—Probably one of the most controversial personalities is Judas Iscariot. Interestingly, he is named as both a disciple and a member of “the Twelve” (John 12:4).

6. *Sincere followers who made serious mistakes and failed often*—This is where we find Peter. Although he was committed from the heart to follow Jesus, he made many serious mistakes (Luke 22:31–32, 57, 60–62).

7. *Jesus’ exclusive use of the term “my disciple”*—From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus began to create, through modeling and teaching, a unique picture of what His disciples should be like. That distinctive picture is developed through stories, parables, illustrations, sermons, and question and answer sessions. The further He gets into His ministry, the more precisely He describes what it means to be *His* follower. At several times in His ministry, Jesus intentionally challenged large groups of curious followers to consider the cost of being a “true” follower. By analyzing what Jesus says are the characteristics of “my disciple,” we gain a clearer picture of what He considered the major distinctive of His definition.

The first time Jesus is recorded using the term “my disciple” is in Luke 14:25–33. He had just finished telling the parable of the great banquet, indicating the kingdom of God was going to include many who were not originally expecting to come. Multitudes were following Him who apparently weren’t serious about Jesus’ mission. Jesus seems to be thinning out the crowds by teaching what it means to be “my disciple.” In this passage, Jesus identifies three principles to follow to be His disciple. A person must:

1. Love Christ far above all other human relationships (v. 26)
2. Follow Christ even if it means suffering and death (v. 27)
3. Give everything to Christ (v. 33)

Jesus makes it clear that to follow Him, they must commit their whole self to Him. A disciple puts the relationship with Jesus Christ above every other relationship, follows Christ no matter what the cost, and gives everything (spiritual gifts and skills) for the kingdom of God.

Three other texts that record Jesus’ use of “my disciple” describe evidences of a *true* disciple. The first of the three texts is John 8:31–32: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The phrase “hold to” is translated in other biblical versions as “abide” or “continue.” Jesus challenged “the Jews who had believed him,” to become His disciples by “holding to” or “continuing in” His teaching. Apparently Jesus saw a significant difference between those who merely listened to His teaching and those who lived by or obeyed His teaching. True disciples would continue to live by the principles Jesus taught. Obedience to Jesus’ teaching is at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus.

The second text relating to evidence of being a disciple is found in John 13:34–35. True disciples model the same kind of love that Christ showed them. Love is the test of a true disciple.

Again in John 15:8, Jesus gives us a third test of a true disciple. The context is the illustration of the vine and the branches. Jesus says: “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit.” This statement indicates that true disciples will be known by others through observing the fruit in their lives.

A follower of Jesus, then, loves Him above all other human relationships, is willing to suffer or even die for Him, and gives everything He owns to Christ. A true disciple of Jesus is recognized by steadfast obedience, love, and a fruitful life. While this standard of discipleship is obviously beyond any standard we can achieve on our own, Christ establishes it as our goal. Jesus' standard of discipleship must be the standard for the church today.

8. *The term "disciple" changes to "Christian"*—A term commonly used in the early church until the beginning of Paul's ministry. After the first persecution in the early church, the stoning of Stephen, the disciples scattered all over the Mediterranean world. As the church grew in the Greek city of Antioch, Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to teach the new believers. He, in turn, called Paul to help him instruct the rapidly growing Gentile church there. It was in Antioch that "the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11:26).

We can only speculate as to the reasons for the change in terminology for Jesus' followers. Some scholars have suggested the change in terms could be related to the fact that the Gentile believers wanted a name that was not associated with the distinctive Jewish culture. Others suggest the terminology could have been changed to eliminate ambiguity associated with the more general term *disciple*. Perhaps the use of *Christian* may have been seen as more descriptive of whom they were following. Within the Roman world, *-ian* added to the end of a proper name signified giving total allegiance to that person. Thus *Christian* became a very clear term connecting absolute loyalty with Christ. Used in this way, *Christian* seems clearer than *disciple*. Whatever the reasons for the change, *disciple* was not used again in the New Testament after the Book of Acts. Throughout the early church period until the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the word *Christian* carried the same distinctive meaning that was associated with Jesus' use of "my disciple." Many Christians died for their faith at the hand of Roman authorities. To be a Christian meant a willingness to give everything for Jesus, even life itself. Persecution and suffering only served to make Christians stronger.

After Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, the term *Christian* began to lose its distinctive biblical meaning. Christianity grew more politically correct and lost its radical edge. From that time until now, the number of people who call themselves Christians has increased dramatically but the standard for a true Christian has lowered drastically. A solution for some theologians today has been to use the term *Christian* to describe the "entry level" believer, and to use the term *disciple* only for the "serious Christian." Unfortunately, this only leads to more confusion. The terms *Christian* and *disciple* must never lose their original meanings. The accurate picture of a disciple of Jesus must be clearly ingrained in our minds.

Becoming a Disciple of Jesus

Another key to understanding how we grow into mature disciples of Jesus Christ is to realize that it is a process. The initial process begins with an integration of all eight of the spiritual growth principles discussed in the last chapter. Although the early stages of growth may be hard to see, God produces great things from small beginnings. The key to continued growth as a disciple of Jesus is in the quality of our relationship with Him. That relationship is defined by the attitude of our heart rather than external rituals and duties. Growth begins inside and spreads to encompass our whole life. Relationships with other like-minded followers of Jesus serve as catalysts to this growth. God may even use discouragement, persecution, or suffering to strengthen our faith.

Spiritual growth, much like the physical process, matures through normal stages. Various denominations and church traditions may call these stages by other names or emphasize them differently. Yet, most people move through them in similar patterns. The process of spiritual growth involves at least four stages:

Stage 1 — Pre-natal Care

Before each of our three boys was born, we provided the best pre-natal care possible. Their mother disciplined herself with a regimen including regular trips to the doctor, vitamins, and a strict diet. Mom and dad prayed for each child's arrival and even played soft music to provide a calm, relaxed environment. Pre-natal care is an important stage in the growth of a healthy newborn.

In a similar way, God the Father prepares for each of His children's birth into His family. He orchestrates (naturally or supernaturally) different events, people, and circumstances in the life of a "believer-to-be" in preparation for the person's "new birth." A good example of this can be found in 2 Timothy 1:5 and 3:14–15, as Paul reflects on the process of how Timothy became a Christian. As you read this account of God's work in Timothy's life, it is important to note that even though Timothy's father was apparently absent, God provided other significant adult models in his life.

Stage 2 — New Birth

Becoming a disciple of Jesus, or a member of God's family, begins with what Jesus called "new birth." When Jesus told Nicodemus, a religious leader, that "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3), he meant every person must be transformed into a child of God by the Spirit. Becoming a disciple (or Christian) is not a process of natural education or reformation whereby a person changes his or her beliefs and behaviors. It begins at a turning point in a person's life when one responds to God's invitation.

Jesus explained this turning point in different ways. In Matthew 18:3 He says, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." In Mark 10:21 Jesus says to a man preoccupied with his wealth: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." To a teacher of the Jewish law Jesus responded to his inquiring about the greatest commandment by stating: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31). Jesus phrased His invitations in various ways, depending on needs and reservations, yet one theme is clear. Followers were asked to make a radical commitment to follow Him, thus allowing them to begin their pilgrimage with Jesus possessing a faith as small as a mustard seed. This small faith directed toward a powerful God accomplishes great things.

Phrases such as "becoming a Christian," "becoming Jesus' disciple," and "being born again" all refer to the same event—a supernatural work of God in a person's life that transforms them. This experience of conversion begins with a change in the heart, rooted in a person's emotions, intellect, and will. The transformation will take a lifetime to fully affect every aspect of one's life.

Stage 3 — Becoming More Like Christ

Conversion brings immediate and instantaneous holiness as the new believer is made perfect in the eyes of God. This has nothing to do with human goodness. It is totally based in Christ's sacrifice on the cross for sins. This is what Scripture records as being saved by grace (Rom. 3:22–26; 5:8; 8:1;

Eph. 2:8–9). Paul makes clear in Romans 12:1–2 that sanctification is a lifelong process of being changed into Christ’s likeness.

The born-again believer has a supernatural desire to follow Jesus and obey His Word in response to God’s grace. I have yet to see, however, a believer who lives in perfect obedience. If this were possible we would not continue to need the sacrifice of Jesus (1 John 1:8–10). Walking in fellowship with the Lord means that we strive to live in obedience to His Word in everything we do, think, and say. To fail, intentionally or unintentionally, requires obedient confession of our sin to our Savior and claiming of His complete forgiveness.

The desire for instant spirituality or instant holiness has led many Christians into despair or depression. There is no instant spiritual experience or secret doctrine that provides a shortcut to Christ-likeness. The apostle Paul confessed he had not “already been made perfect” (Phil. 3:12). When Paul said this, he had been a Christian at least 25 years, completed three missionary journeys, and written nine of the New Testament epistles. Three verses later Paul includes himself among those who are “mature.” He knew that maturity was never absolute. Growing toward Christ-likeness is a lifelong adventure.

Thankfully, God has given us all the resources we need to live a victorious Christian life (2 Pet. 1:3) in the person, the power, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Just as the initial gift of the Holy Spirit revolutionized the early church, He wants to transform the hearts and lives of believers today. Most believers would confirm the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in them, but some fail to experience the day-to-day reality of being “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). In this text Paul commands believers to continually be filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples before He left that they would do even greater things than He did. The Holy Spirit plays the most significant role in enabling and empowering the new believer to become more like Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:16; Gal. 5:25; Eph. 3:16).

Stage 4 — Becoming a Perfect Reflection of Christ

Some describe the disciple’s life on earth as a pilgrimage to become more like Christ. There will be a time when the pilgrimage ends and the believer is transformed into the perfect likeness of Jesus (1 John 3:2). Theologians call this glorification. Paul foretold this event in Romans 8:29 when he said “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” This final and complete transformation experience is the goal of the disciple’s pilgrimage. Even though growing spiritually on earth may involve suffering, hardship, sacrifice, and failure, the final reward will be worth the struggle (Phil. 3:14). This ultimate prize of Christ-likeness for all eternity should be the vision that keeps the Christian pilgrim focused throughout the earthly journey.

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Summary

Throughout church history, particularly in the midst of persecution, Christians have looked forward to the living hope of one day seeing Christ in glory. That hope carries with it the sure expectation of an inheritance that far surpasses the value of the greatest earthly treasure. The joy of

eventually being like Christ and reflecting His radiant glory gives Christians a clear vision even in the midst of suffering, failure, and difficulty.

When Christ called men and women to follow Him, He never hid the cost. In fact, Jesus went out of His way to explain the radical nature of His standards for discipleship. The cost was negligible compared to the glory to be revealed when His followers would actually become like their master. To become His disciple, Jesus taught that one's whole self must commit to loving and obeying Him.

The term *Christian* slowly replaced the term *disciple* in the early church even though this term implied radical commitments. Nurturing at least four stages of spiritual development ultimately achieve a prize for the faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

For Further Discussion

1. What was your understanding of the difference in terminology between *Christian* and *disciple* before reading this chapter? How has it changed?
2. How do you react to the explanation of the possible reasons why the terms were exchanged?
3. Using today's language, how do you think Jesus would explain to someone how to become His follower?
4. In what ways does our future glorification give us hope in the midst of suffering?

Notes

1. Vines, William A., *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Greensburg, PA: Barbour and Company, Inc., 1985), 316.

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