

What Makes a Christian?

If the premise of our study is to examine how a Christian should walk, it is imperative that we take some time to look at what makes a Christian. The term, *Christian*, has come to identify everyone who claims to believe in Christ. However, that is not the picture that is painted in the New Testament. Interestingly, the term is only found three times in the New Testament:

And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter (1 Peter 4:16).

Of these three passages, the first (Acts 11:26) gives us the most information. It defines for us that those who were Christians were *disciples*. The term *disciple* appears far more frequently (some 274 times in the New King James Version of the New Testament). Understanding the idea of a disciple is important to understanding the importance of being a Christian. A Christian is one who is truly a disciple of Jesus!

Disciples...

The term that is translated *disciple* is defined as:

μαθητής, οὗ μ: (derivative of *μαθητεύω* 'to follow, to be a disciple of,' 36.31) a person who is a disciple or follower of someone—'disciple, follower.' *τῆ ἑπαύριον πάλιν εἰστίκει ὁ Ἰωάννης καὶ ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ δύο* 'the next day John was there again with two of his disciples' *Jn 1:35*. Though in the NT *μαθητής* generally refers to men, it is neutral as to sex distinction, and thus in a few instances in the NT also includes women (as in *Ac 6:1*, *πληθυνόντων τῶν μαθητῶν* 'the number of disciples kept growing'). In some languages it may be important to indicate clearly the sex distinction, and in those contexts in which the twelve disciples are being referred to, obviously the reference must be to men. However, when the wider group of disciples is referred to, then some indication should be introduced as to the fact that both men and women were involved.¹

μαθητής [mathetes /math-ay-tes/] n m. From 3129; TDNT 4:415; TDNTA 552; GK 3412; 269 occurrences; AV translates as "disciple" 268 times, and "vr disciple" once. 1 a learner, pupil, disciple.²

The idea conveyed is that one who is a disciple is one who is a true follower, a student of the one whom they claim to be a disciple of. One who causally knows of another is not ever thought of as being a *disciple*. It takes some dedication to follow the teachings of another to be considered their disciple or pupil! The disciples of Jesus were not merely casual observers in the gospel accounts. They were the ones who were with Him constantly. They were doing all that they could to learn of Him and from Him.

1 Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 470. Print.

2 Strong, James. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* 1995 : n. pag. Print.

A disciple will follow the instructions of his leader. This is how a disciple can be identified! One who rejects the instruction of a teacher, and refuses to put those teachings into practice, would never be identified as a disciple of the teacher. We clearly see this in our society. Prominent instructors often are identified as having students to their belief systems. They are said to have followers, or disciples of their methods. We see this type of idea in the educational realm, in the philosophical realm, in the sports realm, and even still in the religious realm. Those who follow in the footsteps of their instructor are identified as disciples!

Disciples of Christ...

As we consider this information, we must ask ourselves: What makes one a disciple of Christ? As we ponder the answer to that question, it will hopefully become evident that the typical idea of discipleship in the religious world does not hold up to the biblical standard.

In the gospel accounts, we read much about the disciples of Jesus. They came from all walks of life, but they had one thing in common: they were determined to follow after Him. When Jesus called His apostles, this was a requirement! Consider the initial calling of a few of the apostles:

And as He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." They immediately left their nets and followed Him. When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him (Mark 1:16–20).

Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them. As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him (Mark 2:13–14).

Following Jesus was going to be no easy task! They were going to be required to make sacrifices to serve Him. They had to "give up" certain things to be His disciples. But, most importantly, they were going to have to actually follow Him. They were going to have to learn from Him, and take the message that He proclaimed and conform their lives to it. They were going to have to go out and teach others that same message. Their responsibility became to make disciples of others (Matthew 28:19).

The disciples that would follow would have the same requirements. They, too, would have to understand the importance and necessity of following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels (Luke 9:23–26).

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:57–62).

In these passages, Jesus made it clear that anyone who wanted to have a relationship with Him was

going to have to make the decision to follow Him, no matter how difficult the sacrifices were that would allow such. Following Christ requires hard choices! One does not accidentally end up following Him. He has to make a distinct choice to follow after the Lord. But, following the Lord provides great blessing:

Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first (Matthew 19:27–30).

Jesus told the apostles that they would have a special place and responsibility if they followed Him. But He also made it clear that everyone who has made the choice to follow after Him will have great blessings. In Him exist great spiritual blessings, relationships with other like-minded followers, and eternal life!

How does one know that they are a disciple of Christ? It starts with being willing to listen to His instructions, follow it, and therefore be obedient to Him. Jesus said it this way:

"If you love Me, keep My commandments (John 14:15).

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (John 14:21).

"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:9–11).

Relationship with Christ is established, maintained and made manifest through obedience to His instructions. But, His instructions would not be limited to only the things that He proclaimed. He told the apostles that He would send the Holy Spirit to them, to reveal the fullness of His instructions (John 14:15-31, 16:7-15). The Holy Spirit would be sent to the apostles so that they could have all truth, and then share it with others. This is exactly what Paul said happened with him (Ephesians 3:1-13). He was inspired by the Holy Spirit with the message of Christ, which he wrote down so that believers for all time would know the mind of Christ. We can keep His commandments because of what Paul (and the other inspired writers) wrote down by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit!

We must, therefore, examine what is said in all of the inspired text to understand God's will for us today. We cannot ignore what is written in scripture that is found beyond the words of Jesus Himself.

God's great expectations...

Perhaps, there is no more significant passage for understanding who is a Christian, who is a true disciple of Jesus, than Romans chapter 6. In this chapter, Paul identifies the manner in which one enters into a relationship with Christ, but he also shows (at least in a general way) what God expects of those who become the disciples of Jesus.

Paul began this section of his epistle by asking the very pointed question: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" In other words, should we continue to commit sinful practices because we know that will show us His grace? The answer that Paul gave is a resounding, "No!" In verse 2, Paul answers the question by saying, according to the New King James version, "Certainly not!" The King

James Version as well as the American Standard Version use the phrase, “God forbid!” Under no circumstances, according to Paul, would one who was the disciple of Jesus continue in sin, expecting God to show His grace! As we continue into this context, Paul is able to express why this is not a reasonable idea:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him (Romans 6:3–9).

Here, Paul made it clear about how one enters into a relationship with Christ. It is through baptism. One becomes a part of Christ, becomes a part of His kingdom by heeding His instructions to be baptized. Paul wrote a similar idea to the Galatian brethren:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:26–27).

There are many in the religious world today that question the necessity of baptism. Paul’s teaching in these passages makes it clear that baptism is essential. It is through baptism that we enter a relationship with Christ. It is the method that God has instituted for us to “put on Christ.” Can one be a disciple of Christ, a follower of Him, and be outside of Him? Certainly not!

In Romans 6, Paul went on to say that when we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into His death. In baptism, we put the old man of sin to death (Romans 6:6, 7). We allow God raise up a new man, that is free of the sin that separated us from Him (Romans 6:4). Sin keeps us from having a relationship with God, as He cannot stay where sin reigns. Before we are baptized into Christ, our sin keeps us separated from Him. The old man of sin reigns. In baptism, we put that old man of sin to death, and God does His saving work. He forgives, He justifies, and He sanctifies. He raises us up as new creatures, freed from sin (Romans 6:7).

Understanding these principles about baptism helps us to understand just how important it is. If it is in baptism that the man of sin is put to death, how can we be new creatures with out it? How can we have our sins removed without it? How can we be saved without it?

This change, that occurs in baptism, is a defining point for the Christian. Paul says that from that point on, we have to have a change in the way we think, and a change in the way we act.

For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:10–14).

Once a person has been cleansed of sin, why would they return to that life? Paul returned to his original question in verse 15 of this context: “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Of course, his answer is the same: “Certainly not!” He then made the point that every person has to choose who they are going to submit to. They are either a slave of sin or a slave of righteousness. Unlike most types of slavery, each individual gets to make this choice for themselves! The recipients of Paul’s letter had made the choice to submit themselves to the authority of God!

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17–18).

They had obeyed the instruction that they had been given. They had been baptized into Christ and thus had put on Christ. They had put to death the old man, had their sins forgiven, and had been raised up new creatures. Paul was making it clear that they now had a responsibility to live in a particular way. They were expected to be slaves of righteousness. This was a justified expectation. After all, they had been “set free from sin.” They could not continue in the sin that they had been set free from. Therefore, they needed to be just as enslaved to the righteousness that was the opposite of sin.

Slaves of Righteousness

Initial obedience restores a relationship with God, but does not ensure that the relationship will continue forever. As we have just seen, God expects that His children become “slaves of righteousness.” To understand this concept more fully, we need to understand the concept of *righteousness*. This word is defined as:

88.13 δικαιοσύνη, ης f: the act of doing what God requires—‘righteousness, doing what God requires, doing what is right.’ μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης ‘happy are those who suffer persecution because of their doing what God requires’ Mt 5:10.³

Paul has established a contrast that we can easily see throughout this context. Those who are slaves of sin are active in sinful practices. Those who are slaves of righteousness are active in the right practices. They are following the instructions of God and striving to live in holiness (Romans 6:19, 23).

This is an ongoing process. The answer to our original question (What makes a Christian?) is answered by two different, yet related ideas. First, one must enter into initial obedience to enter the relationship with Christ. Paul addressed that early in this context. Second, one must continue to live a life directed by every instruction of God. He must choose to live a life of righteousness. This is the same idea that John emphasized in His first epistle:

Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother (1 John 3:4–10).

So, one who is a true Christian is one who is baptized into Christ for the remission of sins, and then continues to live a life of practicing righteousness. As we continue our study, we will be looking in more detail at what practicing righteousness entails. For now, we want to be clear concerning the basic principles of God expects. One cannot be a Christian without first submitting to Him in obedience, and one cannot remain a Christian without a devotion to living a life of righteousness!

³ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 743. Print.

Questions...

1. Define the term "Christian." How many times is this term found in the New Testament?
2. Is there a difference between a Christian and a disciple? Why or why not?
3. What made a person a follower of Jesus in the first century? What makes one a follower of Jesus today?
4. Can one think they are a disciple of Christ, and not be? How did Jesus say one could be identified as His disciple?
5. Describe the process by which Jesus said He would send His word. Why is this important to understanding what it means to be the disciple of Jesus?
6. In Romans 6, how did Paul say that one entered a relationship with Christ? How does this speak to the essential nature of the practice of baptism?
7. Describe the change that is supposed to take place at the point of baptism for the believer. How is this change reflected in actions?