

the second step

Understand that the call of God is the call to discipleship, and determine to follow, learn both from and about him, and value our relationship with him above all things

Discipleship is an old-fashioned word for something that never goes out of date. For practical purposes, it really just means “learning to maximise our relationship with God”. It is also a word which can conjure up images of struggle and self-discipline, which many people find unattractive. The reality - as we shall see - is very different: Following Christ in this way (and there *is* no other way) is carried out almost entirely in *his* strength, not our own. It’s richly rewarding, deeply satisfying...and it’s God’s plan for each of us. After this session, we’ll be concentrating on how discipleship works in practice - how we come to enjoy all God has for us - but let’s first explore *what it really is*. We may be pleasantly surprised...

a personal invitation

The call to discipleship is the call to relationship. It is a personal invitation delivered to each of us - individually - by Christ himself, signed in his blood. It is an invitation to accompany him wherever he may lead, through whatever circumstances. Though the routes may vary for each person, the final destination is always the same - *his* home, which will also be *our* home. The call is an invitation to spend eternity with Jesus.

We have already accepted our invitations. We may have been walking with Jesus for some time, or perhaps we only really started our journey last week - but what matters is that we keep in step with him. The rest of the programme is a practical guide on how to do just that, but we will want to build our responses to God on a firm foundation of *understanding* - understanding what discipleship actually means, and its central role in our relationship with God. We also need to know in our hearts and minds that it is not only God’s plan that we should live as disciples, but that all his other plans for us depend on us doing just that. Step Two is partly designed to explode the myth (sometimes heard) that discipleship is only a calling for ‘exceptional’ Christians. In reality, discipleship is the standard requirement for all who believe - though in responding to God, we may well *become* ‘exceptional’ people, as his purpose for our lives unfolds.

discipleship – then and now

One of the original meanings of ‘disciple’ was ‘one who learns’. The term was applied to followers of John the Baptist, but was more usually associated with those who were training to be rabbis (religious teachers). The first disciples of Jesus were different to rabbinical trainees in several respects, not least because of who their teacher was, and what he taught. Rabbinical disciples chose their tutor and there was a set period for their learning experience - the relationship between tutor and student being temporary. Jesus’ disciples were chosen by him, and there was no limit set on their learning. Indeed, Jesus made it clear to them that this process would continue after his departure - through the Holy Spirit - who would lead his followers into ‘all truth’. The relationship between Christ and his disciples was a permanent bond. But what of discipleship today - what place does it have in Christianity?

Discipleship *is* Christianity. There is no suggestion in the bible that a meaningful relationship with God can take place outside of a commitment to discipleship - just the opposite, in fact. Neither is there any reason to believe that God’s requirements - and his promises - have changed since the bible was written. What may have changed, though, is the *church* - the ‘body of Christ’.

losing the plot –and missing the point

The late David Watson, an evangelist, put it like this: “Christians in the West have largely neglected what it means to be a disciple of Christ. The vast majority of western Christians are church members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, bible-readers, even born-again believers or Spirit-filled charismatics - but not true disciples of Jesus. If we were willing to learn the real meaning of discipleship and actually to become disciples, the church in the West would be transformed, and the impact on society would be staggering”.

This is quite a claim. Actually it is two claims. The first thing David Watson said is that the vast majority of the church-goers he is talking about are not, in reality, followers of Christ. The second claim is that should these people discover the meaning of discipleship *and act upon it*, the effect on the church and society would be enormous.

Was he right? How many churches do we know of that are truly dynamic? How many have a congregation that is busy *on a daily basis* meeting, serving, and sharing the gospel, where everyone is either eagerly learning, or already enjoying an intense and powerful relationship with God? The truth is, there are very few churches like that today - yet we read in the book of Acts that is exactly how the first churches operated. Those early Christians from Jerusalem would probably have difficulty in recognising some of our institutions as churches of the living God at all. The difference between the church in Acts and what we have today is simply this: They understood what it meant to be disciples, our generation - broadly speaking - does not.

True Christianity, which *is* discipleship, made a deep impact on the ancient world. Within 300 years, it had travelled to every place that featured on the maps of the time, and had become the official religion of the only world power. We may wonder why Christianity no longer takes the world by storm, but the answer is self-evident: It is because Christianity is not often preached.

What is often preached today are just the bare facts about Christ and a little about repentance, after which there may be an ‘altar call’. Those who come forward are welcomed into the church where, from time to time, they will hear other basic truths about Christ. In many cases, they do not get to hear what the commitment they have made actually means - they don’t hear it during the initial preaching, and they don’t hear it during the church services. They may spend their lives with the comforting knowledge that they are somehow ‘saved’, but there may be little fruit from their relationship with God - and yet the bible tells us that “*by their fruit you will recognise them*” (Matthew 7:16). They cannot do the “*good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*” (Ephesians 2:10), for two reasons: They are unlikely to find out what good works God wants them to do, and even if they do find out, they are ill-equipped to do them.

the fear factor

One of the reasons (which does not stand close inspection) why real Christianity is not always presented from the pulpit is this: Following Christ could sound difficult, and perhaps not every church-goer wants to hear about it. But of course, they *need* to hear about it - urgently - *especially* those who imagine they can enjoy the benefits of a relationship with God without living as disciples of Christ. The idea that we can treat God like a lifestyle accessory and still have new life - now and for eternity - was dealt with in the first session, but how difficult *is* discipleship? Let’s take a moment to look at just a few of the concepts of Christian living, and perhaps we will see why sometimes people may prefer an undemanding message.

Matthew 7:13-14 *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate, and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”.*

Matthew 8:21-22 *Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father”. But Jesus said, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead”.*

Matthew 13:44-45 *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls, when he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it”.*

Luke 14:27 *“...anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”.*

Luke 14:33 *“In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple”.*

There are very many bible passages that deal with the cost of being a disciple. The apostle Paul often wrote about the sacrifices involved in being a true believer - indeed, in the book of Romans he urged his readers to become ‘living sacrifices’. It all seems rather tough - sacrifice, putting Jesus first no matter what, putting to death the sinful nature, and so on. We may think it quite understandable that it isn’t a popular message....*until we realise that this isn’t the whole message!*

a little knowledge is a dangerous thing...

There are those who reject the life Christ calls them to - and those who neglect to teach that lifestyle - simply because it appears to be so difficult. G.K.Chesterton famously remarked, ‘Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried’.

G.K.Chesterton was almost right, but it hasn’t been found difficult - it has been found *daunting*. The reason it has been found daunting is that people read portions of scripture (such as the one quoted above) and assume that Christianity is a titanic struggle with little hope of ‘getting it right’. These scriptures, however, give an incomplete picture. Let’s add a few more and see if it changes things...

Matthew 22:37 Jesus replied, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”.*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 *“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”.*

2 Corinthians 10:5 *“...and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to God”.*

These verses (and others like them) certainly change things. Real Christianity is not difficult - *it is humanly impossible!* It is humanly impossible to meet these requirements. We are simply unable to love with *all* our hearts, pray *continually*, give thanks in *all* circumstances - or take every thought captive to God. Nor, for that matter, can we attain *“the whole measure of the fulness of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:13), nor yet, achieve the same quality of unity - with each other - as Jesus has with his heavenly father (John 17:21).

the good news about the good news

This is actually wonderful news. If Christianity was merely immensely difficult, we could expect to fail... but it is not difficult, it is humanly impossible. *We may therefore be sure that God Himself will accomplish in us what he has called us to be and to do, just so long as we remain in him.* Jesus did not go to the cross in our place so we could fail. He didn't set unapproachable standards so he could spend eternity alone; he wants heaven populated by people who have become fit to stand in his presence - through *his* power. Following Christ is not about self-improvement or self-effort - we couldn't improve *enough*, we couldn't try hard *enough*. Let's briefly return to scripture, because we need a few more details for our thumbnail sketch of the Christian life:

Mark 10:26 - 27 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "*Who then can be saved*". Jesus looked at them and said, "*With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God*".

2 Corinthians 12: 8 "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*".

Phillipians.4:13 "*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*".

John 14:12 "*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these...*"

It is in God's power that we are saved; that we stand, that we serve. Our part in this process is merely to remain eligible to receive all he has for us. And we don't have to struggle....

Jesus calls us to discipleship with these words: "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light*". (Matthew 11:28-30)

"*For my yoke is easy and my burden is light*". So now we have it - Christ's own assessment of the 'difficulties' of discipleship... but how does that fit in with - for example - "*any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple*"? It fits in *perfectly*. Jesus is not asking us to take on an additional burden in life. His 'yoke' is not something extra we have to struggle with - *it is a replacement for the heavier burden we are already carrying*.

The sixth chapter of Romans spells it out for us - we are either slaves to sin, or slaves to righteousness. Put simply, we either wear the yoke of 'self', or the yoke of Christ - and every person in the world is wearing one or the other. We are born into the yoke of sin, but we don't have to remain in it. We can replace it with the easy, light burden of Jesus, with all that means for this life and beyond. When Jesus says any of us who does not give up everything cannot be his disciple, he is merely stating a fact: We cannot serve two masters - we cannot wear the yokes of sin and of Christ together. As an illustration, imagine a bullock struggling with the weight of two yokes, both pulling him in different directions. Try as he might, he could do nothing worthwhile - all his efforts would be pointless. Now imagine a Christian in the same situation, trying to follow Christ but still yoked to sin. *That* is when discipleship becomes a struggle; *that* is when it is a burden we cannot carry. The yoke of Christ *is* easy, it fits perfectly - but it cannot be worn with another. Those who try to serve Christ and Self will satisfy neither. They will struggle without God's power, without joy and without success.

We are not called to such an unequal struggle. We *are* called to put on "*the full armour of God*" (Ephesians 6:10-18); we are called to 'take the field', and perhaps to deliver a few well-

aimed blows of the sword - but it is always the Lord's battle. It is he who wins the victory, because only he can. Our part is small, but essential - *we need only to co-operate with him.*

how it works

Discipleship has its own 'recipe for success'. All we bring to the 'recipe' is faith - which is a gift of God anyway - love, which is a natural consequence of real faith in action, and obedience, which flows from love. God provides the 'main ingredient' - his limitless, life-changing power, as represented by the Holy Spirit working in us and through us. Let's look at what Jesus says about this: *"If you love me, you will obey what I command, and I will ask the Father, and He will give you another counsellor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth."* (John 14: 15-16) This revelation of how Christianity works is so important that Jesus repeats it in verses 23-26 of the same chapter, where he adds that the Holy Spirit will teach us *'all things'*.

Is it really that simple to live the dynamic Christian life? To answer that, we need only remind ourselves of the last session, where we looked at the start of Peter's ministry. If Peter brought anything more than faith, love and obedience to Pentecost, it isn't mentioned in the bible. But Peter's story is essentially the story of Christians through the ages - ordinary people submitting their lives to God, with extraordinary results.

Faith, love and obedience from us...and the Holy Spirit from God. Our willingness and application, and *his* power. It is not just a winning combination, it is one that wins easily. It shouldn't be a struggle. As we grow in Christ, we will want more faith, love and obedience, because we will want more of God. We can ask for more faith, though often faith grows just because we exercise the faith we already have; greater love is the product of a deepening relationship, and obedience - which stems from love - we will come to recognise as the key that unlocks God's best plans for our lives.

Finally, we should briefly consider the *rewards* of discipleship. We might think that the privilege of knowing God, of serving him - of living daily in his presence - is reward enough for the little he asks of us. Yet it is in God's nature to bless his people extravagantly. Jesus spoke of the rewards of following him on several occasions, but we will look at just two: *"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields - and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life."* (Mark 10:29-30).

Who is this 'extended family'? It is the family of God, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus also said, *"For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"*.(Matthew 12:50). Part of the reward of discipleship is to enjoy a family relationship, not just with other Christians, but with Christ himself - *eternally!* We may wonder why 'persecutions' appear in a list of blessings, but the answer is not hard to find...Matthew 5:10-12 makes it clear that we are still *very much* on the subject of 'rewards'.

Let's summarise this second session:

1. Discipleship is Christianity. *God's requirement that we follow Christ and learn from him has not changed. Our relationship with God depends on our willingness to become disciples.*

2. Discipleship seems difficult. *A casual reading of the bible might suggest that discipleship is a struggle.*

3. Meeting God's requirements is humanly impossible. *Further consideration of the bible shows that God does not just command us to do difficult things - he insists on the impossible!*

4. God enables us to do the impossible. *God himself, through his Holy Spirit, will enable us to meet all his requirements, and become the people he wants us to be. It is not a struggle - Christ's burden is easy, and his yoke is light.*

5. There is a 'recipe for success'. *Faith, love and obedience from us, and the power of the Holy Spirit from God, are all we need to experience a genuine transformation of our lives.*

6. God delights in blessing the faithful. *There are great rewards for those who follow Jesus, but the greatest is to become a close family member of the saviour of the world - forever!*

A prayer of commitment

Father God,

I thank you for your plan for my life, that you want me to succeed, and that you will give me everything I need to reach my full potential. I thank you for the faith and love I already have, and I ask you for yet more. I commit myself to the process of discipleship, in the knowledge that you will enable me to do all that you ask through the power of your Holy Spirit. Keep me willing, focussed and obedient I pray, and let your will continue to prevail in my life - achieving the 'impossible' in me, and through me.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The Second Step is this:

Understand that the call of God is the call to discipleship, and determine to follow, learn both from and about him, and value our relationship with him above all things.

Today, we should really understand that call. As we have seen what discipleship actually is and how - far from being difficult - it is almost entirely about God working in us, we will also be ready to follow and learn. Valuing our relationship with Him above all things is the only logical response to who he is, and to the provision that he has made for us to become true disciples of Jesus.

Having taken that Second Step, we are now ready to build on the firm foundations that have been laid. The remaining steps are designed specifically to draw us deeper into a passionate relationship with our creator, in practical and achievable ways. As we respond to him, there will be no limits - no boundaries - on how close that relationship becomes (nor on the fruit of that relationship) unless we, ourselves, draw back.

comments and questions for the group meeting

the journal...continued

Morning Prayer

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

Through the day

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

In the evening

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete your journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to His leading.

Day One

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Mark 10:17-27

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The call to discipleship is Christ's personal invitation for us to become the people we were designed to be - fulfilled, empowered members of his family, now and always*

Day Two

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Matthew 13:44-45

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *Discipleship is Christianity. Our relationship with God depends on our willingness to become disciples.*

Day Three

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *Faith, love and obedience from us....and the Holy Spirit from God. Our willingness and application - plus his power - is always a winning combination!*

Day Four

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Matthew 11:28-30

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about.... *We are born into the yoke of sin, but we don't have to remain in it. We can replace it with the easy, light burden of Jesus, with all that means for this life and beyond.*

Day Five

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Phillipians 4:13

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about.... *God himself, through his Holy Spirit, will enable us to meet all his requirements, and become the people he wants us to be. It is not a struggle - Christ's burden is easy, and his yoke is light.*

Day Six - The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

a) God

b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

The 'weekly review' is intended to bring our relationship with God into focus, and perhaps give us a little encouragement. Though it is for 'our eyes only', we can share aspects of it in the group - if we feel it might be beneficial to ourselves or others.

PREPARATION FOR THE THIRD SESSION

Please prepare for the third session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group.