

# Disciples

Cultivate Series, May 28 & 29 (Memorial Day Weekend) | Matthew 16:13-20  
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Is there a difference between a Christian and a disciple?

**Some of us probably assume it's like the difference between a Chevy and a Cadillac.**

There are many similarities. Chevrolet and Cadillac are both General Motors brands. There are even vehicles shared by the two brands that are built on the same platforms.

There are some differences. Chevrolet is the bread-and-butter brand for General Motors, producing everything from entry-level vehicles to performance sports cars. Cadillac, on the other hand, produces luxury vehicles.

Are Christians and disciples like Chevrolet and Cadillac? Are Christians bread-and-butter followers of Jesus while disciples are the luxury models?

**The definition of "Christian" in our culture can be minimalistic.**

Simply checking a box on a survey form can qualify one as a Christian for some researchers.

In a 2019 Pew Research Center study, 65% of Americans identify as Christians.

What does that indicate? Vague belief in God? Some sense of tradition? That definition is minimalistic for sure.

**By contrast, thinking about Jesus' Twelve Disciples can leave us with a lofty impression of disciples.**

Jesus had many followers. However, twelve of them stand out.

These were his twelve closest followers, his closest traveling companions.

Jesus gave them special training, special assignments, and special authority.

We call them the Twelve Disciples. In truth, Jesus designated them apostles.

However, when we call them the Twelve Disciples, we are implicitly making their training, their missions, and their results the bar for being a disciple. If we don't know Jesus the way they do, if we don't travel broadly the way they did, and if we don't work miracles as they were expected to do, then we don't think of ourselves as disciples.

The Twelve Disciples can become our picture of a disciple.

**So, are you a Christian or a disciple?**

Is there a difference between the two terms?

If there is, then which term best describes you?

**Jesus calls everyone who follows him to be his disciple.**

The term "Christian" emerged very early in church history. In **Acts 11:26** we read,

*... And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*

That's early.

The term "disciple" is even older. It implies one who identifies with a leader, learns from that leader, seeks to emulate that leader, and seeks to carry on the leader's work.

That's what Jesus called people to. In **Mark 1:17**, Jesus calls Andrew and his brother Simon to follow him:

*... "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men."*

Jesus calls them to become disciples. Therefore, all of Jesus' followers are called disciples.

In Matthew 28:19, his parting instructions to his followers in the Great Commission, Jesus calls us to make disciples:

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ..."*

Disciple isn't the luxury, upgraded model of a follower of Jesus, and Christian isn't the bread-and-butter brand. Jesus calls everyone who follows him to be and make disciples.

If that's what Jesus calls us to be and do, then we want to understand this. It's important that we know what a disciple is and what a disciple does. It's important that we decide to be who Jesus says we are and to do what Jesus is calling us to do.

## Disciples know who Jesus is.

### Let's set the scene.

Jesus began to occasionally leave the region around the Sea of Galilee to go north into lands that were more thoroughly Gentile.

On one such trip, Jesus took his followers toward the city of Caesarea Philippi, at the base of Mount Hermon near the headwaters of the Jordan River.

### There, in Matthew 16:13-17, Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was:

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."*

### The crowds assumed that Jesus was a great prophet of the past returned from the dead.

The text mentions John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah.

One of the Herods, who had executed John the Baptist, thought that Jesus was perhaps his old prophetic adversary come back from the dead.

The Old Testament closed in **Malachi 4:5** with the expectation that God would send the great prophet Elijah back to earth before Messiah:

*"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."*

Some people thought Jesus was Elijah.

When they looked at Jesus, the people concluded that he must be a prophet.

### **Then Jesus pressed the disciples themselves about who they thought he was.**

He wasn't conducting a public opinion poll.

Jesus wanted to know what his disciples thought about him.

### **Jesus' identity was clear in the background.**

When Jesus was born, it was clear that He was the Anointed One and the Son of God.

At Jesus' baptism, God the Father announced that this was his Son.

The disciples themselves said that Jesus was the Son of God when he calmed the raging sea. However, they didn't really understand. The evidence was clear but still in the background.

### **Therefore, Simon's response could only have come by faith given to him by God.**

Simon, ever the outspoken and direct disciple, stepped forward.

"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

Simon got it. However, he didn't get it because he was cleverer than anyone else.

Simon got who Jesus was because God the Father had sent God the Holy Spirit to open Simon's eyes.

God gave Simon the gift of faith to see, to understand, to believe, and to confess.

### **There is room in our faith for questions.**

As we make our way through life, we do not always see clearly.

Some things are confusing. Other things hurt. We make mistakes. People we love suffer.

There is room in our faith for questions. We see plenty of evidence of it in the Bible itself!

### **However, our faith cannot be consistently tentative.**

There are pieces of our doctrine that form foundations; if those foundations are always shaky, then the house we build on top of them will never be stable.

At some point we must believe the foundations of our faith, and we need to be able to state those beliefs with confidence the way Simon did, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Disciples know who Jesus is. We confess that belief confidently and then build our lives on it.

### **Disciples rely on Jesus' power.**

#### **Jesus continued his response to Simon in Matthew 16:18:**

*"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it".*

### **Jesus renamed Simon.**

Simon was the disciple's given name.

Sometimes Simon was known by the name "Cephas," which means "Rock" in Aramaic. Clearly, Simon was a reliable person of strong convictions.

Here Jesus called Simon "Peter," which in Greek means "Rock."

### **Jesus made faith the basis for his Church.**

After naming Simon “the rock,” Jesus says that he will build his church on that rock.

Jesus isn’t saying that he will build his church personally on Simon Peter.

Instead, he’s saying that faith given by his Father to Simon and a confession like Simon’s will become the foundation upon which he will build the Church.

### **Jesus stood in the shadow of the Sanctuary of Pan.**

At the base of Mount Hermon there was a cave. In ancient times an underground river came gushing out of the cave. The cave was so deep, people couldn’t find the bottom.

In very ancient times, this cave became a place of worship of local gods.

The Greeks and then the Romans made it a shrine to the pagan god, Pan.

Here is a picture of the cave today.

The people of that day thought of it as a gateway to the realm of the dead, a gate to hell.

That’s probably where Jesus was standing when he said what he did.

### **Jesus put his disciples on the offensive against the gates of hell.**

Frequently, we read this passage in a defensive kind of way. We think of the gates of hell as coming against us as Christians, because that’s somehow the way life feels. But we hear a reassurance that somehow the powers of evil will not destroy us.

When you look at it carefully, you can see that that’s not what Jesus was saying at all.

Jesus does not seem to see the world the way we do. Jesus doesn’t seem to see hell as threatening, storming, or winning in the cosmic struggle for the world. Gates are not offensive weapons. They are defensive ones. Jesus seems to see the power of God and the people of God as storming hell and overcoming evil.

Jesus is putting his disciples on the offensive in the struggle against the powers of evil.

### **Our faith cannot be purely private.**

Faith isn’t something we keep to ourselves to comfort us quietly in life.

Faith in Christ changes the way we think and live.

Our faith in the Risen Christ, who is Lord, means that our faith is not just private.

Our faith is meant to be contagious. It spreads from us to others.

Our faith is meant to be catalytic. It changes the world.

### **We all live in the shadow of the Sanctuary of Pan.**

The Sanctuary of Pan cast a long shadow of empire, violence, and false gods.

We, too, live in a world of empires. Some of those empires are political empires, seeking to impose their will wrongly on others. Some of those empires are economic, seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Some of those empires are philosophical empires, seeking to impose wrong ways of thinking on others.

We also live in a world of violence. Sometimes violence rears its ugly head in very straightforward ways. People rob and kill and destroy. We see that all too frequently. Our world is frequently a place of violence as others seek to impose their will on us.

We even live in a world of foreign gods.

Just as in Jesus' day, we are living in the shadow of the Sanctuary of Pan.

### **Disciples rely on Jesus' power.**

Jesus said bluntly that the gates of hell would not prevail against the followers of Jesus, against us. What does he mean? It's right back in God's Story from Creation to Conclusion.

I want to focus on chapter four of God's Story today.

In Chapter four of God's Story, "The Church," we see two arrows: one coming down from the cross and one going back up to the cross.

The arrow coming down from the cross reminds us that when we follow Jesus, God sends us his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit seals us with salvation, begins to remake us in the image of Jesus, gives us gifts for ministry, fills us with the power of God, and sends us out.

The arrow pointing back up to the cross reminds us that we live for God, we serve as his ambassadors representing him in the world, we make and multiply disciples, and we give it all back to God as his glory.

With the power of the Holy Spirit, we storm the gates of hell, and they do not prevail against us. That's powerful, good news.

Disciples don't live privately in our own power. We live publicly and rely on Jesus' power.

### Disciples do what Jesus wants them to do.

#### **Jesus gave Simon surprising authority in Matthew 16:19-20:**

*"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.*

#### **The keys of the kingdom of heaven imply that eternal life and eternal death hang in the balance.**

The image of keys means that there are doors that can be opened or closed. The doors being opened or closed depend on the keys being used to unlock them or not.

The keys to which Jesus refers here actually belong to him as the Son of God and the one who died and rose again. In John's vision in **Revelation 1:18** Jesus says,

*"... I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."*

He has the keys that open eternal life and death.

Here Jesus seems to be delegating some of that authority to Peter. However, he is not giving it to Peter personally, but to the Church.

The difference between eternal life and eternal death is delegated to the Church. Whatever role we have in deciding life or death in eternity pales in comparison with our decisions now about whether to share the Good News or not. If we embrace mission, we are opening doors to eternal life. When we neglect our work, we are closing and locking doors for people.

### **Binding and loosing imply that we know the difference between right and wrong.**

Binding and loosing in the Old Testament imply that we restrict or allow certain things in keeping with the Law.

Interpreting what is right and wrong now belongs to the Church, to all of us. Later in **Matthew 18:18** Jesus said,

*"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

With the Holy Spirit we know the difference between right and wrong. Not only do we know the difference between right and wrong, but we are expected to live rightly.

### **Our faith cannot be completely contemplative.**

There are forms of discipleship that are information-based. It's all about what we know.

There are also forms of discipleship that are discipline-based. It's all about our spiritual practices and how we feel because of those disciplines. Do we feel spiritual, do we feel God's presence, do we feel holy, do we feel happy?

Both of these forms of discipleship make us the focus of discipleship.

Worse, these forms of discipleship make the interior life the focus.

That's not real discipleship. Real discipleship does involve knowledge, discipline, and a changed heart. However, real discipleship also moves outward.

### **Disciples obey Jesus.**

We avoid the things he tells us to avoid and do the things he tells us to do.

Our faith shapes our days, our personal lives, our homes, our careers, and our finances.

Our faith also leads us to shape the world around us into the likeness of the Kingdom of God.

### **Disciples multiply disciples of Jesus.**

If we hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven, God doesn't give them to us to keep people out.

God wants us to fling the doors open wide and call people to faith in Jesus.

He wants us to storm the gates of hell to empty hell of its future residents.

He wants us to fill the kingdom of heaven with his children.

### **Be a disciple.**

#### **We've tried everything else.**

Christian faith has been declining on this continent in numbers, as a percentage of the population, in fervor of conviction, and in ability to shape the public realm for decades.

We've tried everything to reverse the decline.

We've tried education. We've tried big rallies.

We've driven buses, we've built buildings, and we've sent mailers.

We've built colleges, held concerts, and even tried smoke and laser shows.

I was present at one church on a Sunday when they were giving away a car.

We've tried everything, but the Church is not advancing.

**Disciples are Jesus' plan to build his Kingdom.**

Disciples make disciples who make disciples. That's Jesus' plan for the Church.

He told us that this plan leads to storming the gates of hell.

This is the plan that built the Church in the first place.

This is the plan that is succeeding right now around the world.

Making disciples is Jesus' plan to build his Kingdom.

Making disciples is Valley's plan to build this church.

**Next week in a sermon called "Engage," we will talk about your part in growing as a disciple.**

There are things you can do to begin growing as a disciple.

I want to talk about those things together. I hope you'll be part of that and that we will all embrace these strategies as our own.

**Then in a sermon called "Cultivate," we will talk about the church's part in your journey as a disciple.**

You are not on your own in being a disciple or in making and multiplying disciples.

We need to stand together in this process.

The church has a part in your journey as a disciple, and I want to talk about that as well.

Where does that leave us today?

**In a sea of Christians, let's be disciples.**

Let's move from tentative faith to knowing and confessing who Jesus is.

Let's move from private faith to relying on Jesus in powerful faith.

Let's move from completely contemplative faith to faith that shapes our lives, shapes the world around us, and multiplies disciples.

Let's be disciples of Jesus.