

This is How They Will Know You Are My Disciples

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Introduction

When Jesus was on this earth and meeting with his disciples in the upper room, he washed the feet of the disciples and then told them, “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples.” (John 13:34-35, HCSB). Although loving one another is at the core of being a disciple, there is a bit more to it than that. The goal of this document is to create a tangible list of some of the essential indicators or marks of a disciple based on biblical interpretation and a review of some relevant sources on the matter. There are many marks to identify a disciple found throughout the Bible, but most can be understood in the following: Love God, Seek God, Trust God, and Share God.

Love God – The Greatest of All

Throughout the entire Bible, one of the most often repeated commands to God’s people is to love God. This is the quintessential command expressed by God to His followers from the beginning of scriptural history. When God prescribed His law to the people of Israel in the wilderness, one of the most repeated statements was: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:5 HCSB). When King David collected his songs to God in the Psalms, he said: “Love the LORD, all His faithful ones. The LORD protects the loyal, but fully repays the arrogant.” (Psalm 31:23, HCSB.) Furthermore, who could forget the first commandment: “Do not have other gods besides Me.” (Exodus 20:3, HCSB), which could easily be understood as “Do not love anything more than me.” Even in the Old Testament, God wanted his people to love Him.

If the focus moves to the New Testament, it is equally clear that Jesus taught the importance of love as being paramount to any other command: “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, HCSB). Although this command does focus on love for each other when Jesus mentions to “Love one another. Just as I have loved you...” Jesus extrapolates this statement more when he said: “If you keep My commands you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commands and remain in His love.” (John 15:10, HCSB). In this way, “...Just as I have loved you...” can be related to “...I have kept My Father’s commands and remain in His love...” to say that loving each other is the same as loving Jesus, which means “Love God.”

What is it that truly makes a Christian different than anyone else? If being a Christian means doing one thing, what would it be? The answer is quite simple – love God. Now, it is important to caveat this by saying that the way humans understand love is not even close to how God understands it¹. No matter how much humans try to love God and love others, that love will never be as perfect as God’s love because nothing is more perfect than God’s love (cf. Ephesians 1:4-5). Yet, as a disciple, Christians devote their lives to trying to become a ‘little Christ’². In this way, a disciple must seek to Love God with all their heart can muster. While this may seem challenging to some (even Christians) when one devotes themselves to being as much like Christ as possible, love can take on a new dimension and focus.

The disciple walking with God for any time will notice that some of their old ways seem to fade away. This is an active part of God’s redemptive work in the lives of all people, wherein

¹ Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2016), 25.

²C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 177.

the Holy Spirit clears out their old hearts and gives them new ones that glorify God (cf. Luke 5:37-39). When the Holy Spirit excites the fire within someone, the love they now understand cannot be contained and must flow outward. This is most evident in the lives of new Christians who have understood grace and mercy for the very first time³, yet it also appears in the hearts of those who have witnessed the ‘dark night of the soul’ as a Christian and have found God working in a totally different way than He had before⁴. If one has been spending time with God, being disciplined by God, this love for God and His creation cannot be overlooked.

Unfortunately, this love for God is so perfect that humans cannot hope to exemplify it in most of their daily activities. This does not mean they are not trying to love God, but they cannot feel it sometimes. A common cliché repeated by parenting professionals all the time is something to the effect of “I love my kids all the time, but I don’t always like them.” God loves His children all the time and likes them all the time. But when Christians stray from God’s love, they must be put back on the right path. This often requires God to discipline them in various ways, just as earthly parents must discipline their children sometimes. If a disciple seems devoid of love, this may mean they are experiencing discipline that could be only for a short or perhaps a long time.

If one were to watch a child who has committed some offense in their home and has been disciplined (be it by grounding, for example), they may not appear outwardly loving their parents. In the same way, the parent may be downcast because their child has committed an offense and the parent was forced to render punishment, and they may not have a smile on their face. Does this mean the parent does not love the child or vice versa? Of course not; something is happening that tempers that love. This is also biblical, as explained in the Book of Hebrews: “No

³ Alvin L. Reid, *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are and How to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2002), 195.

⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (London, Thomas Baker, 1908), 5

discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:11, HCSB). No matter the circumstance, loving God – even while being disciplined – is the foremost mark of a disciple.

Seek God – All Things Will Follow

Loving God is the essential mark of a disciple, yet it is not the only one. To understand what it means to love God, Christians must also seek Him. In fact, loving God or another person requires one to pursue them in all they do. For instance, a relationship between two will never prosper if the two parties do not seek each other somehow. God is always pursuing His children no matter where they may go (cf. Psalm 139:7-8). However, not all of God’s children seek Him. In some cases, this may be because the person is not a believer and may not know the love of God. In other cases, a person might have come to know God at another stage in their life, yet they have chosen to walk away from Him. Despite the human potential to ignore God and act as though He does not seek them, it is evident in the Scripture that He will continue for one’s whole life (cf. Matthew 8:10-14).

As Christians, we are called to seek God with everything we have and do. After all, if God seeks His children so diligently, why would Christians not seek to do the same? The most straightforward answer is that Christians allow themselves to be preoccupied with other things because it is in their nature⁵. Humans seek incessantly to control their path forward and to ‘carve a path’ because they feel it is necessary to control their destiny. A true disciple, however, understands that the wholehearted pursuit of God should be an all-consuming task as the scripture states: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things

⁵ Thom S. Rainer and Art Rainer, *Simple Life* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2009), 53.

will be provided for you.” (Matthew 6:33, HCSB). The critical review of the phrasing reveals: “Seek God first, and all else follows.”

In the Christian walk, there are many ups and downs, hills and valleys, etc., which can sometimes be too difficult for a believer without solid faith⁶. In many cases, if the believer is questioned about what caused this downturn in their life, it is easy to hear repetitions of the same theme: “I don’t know, it just happened.” But, if one peels back the layers a little, it is easy to see that many of these challenges arose when one tried to make decisions without seeking God’s guidance. Or, in some cases, without thinking about God at all. A disciple must make it their life’s work to seek God in all things. Does this mean that they must ask God’s permission for everything? Certainly not! Instead, they should seek God through prayer when making decisions – especially those that may have far-reaching impacts (such as a new career, moving to another place, etc.).

One can see how Jesus’ disciples chose to follow him to explain this need for disciples to seek God. In the case of Simon (Peter) and Andrew, Jesus told them that he would make them “fishers of men” (cf. Matthew 4:18-19). Shortly thereafter, Jesus called to James and John, and they got up from what they were doing and followed him (cf. Matthew 4:21-22). In the context of the time of the call of the disciples, Jesus was already a respected Rabbi who traveled across Israel teaching and preaching. In the case of these first four disciples, they would have been Jewish people who understood what being asked to follow a Rabbi meant. They would follow the rabbi and be taught more about God. Hence, they were seeking God, and Jesus allowed them to do that.

⁶ J Lenore Wright and Andrew E Arterbury, “Personal Jesus: Reflections on God’s Call,” *Religions* 13, no. 111 (2022): 7.

The need to seek God may not always come from one's desire to 'do more' as the disciples did. In fact, the more Jesus preached and taught across Israel, the more it drew the attention of many people. By the time Jesus reached the apex of his ministry, the scriptures tell us that Jesus gathered huge crowds: "Large crowds followed Him from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan." (Matthew 4:25, HCSB). The reasons that people sought Jesus were many, including the desire to learn of God, be healed, seek fame, etc. In those days, however, it was easy to find Jesus (hence the crowds), but in the modern day, when Jesus has returned to heaven, it is not as easy. While it is true that the Holy Spirit is always with Christians, this does not mean that people will actively seek God through the Spirit. Instead, a disciple must make an active effort to seek God in all things⁷. But fear not! The scripture also tells believers that if they seek God, He will come to them: "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13, HCSB). Indeed, the second most crucial mark of a disciple is one who earnestly seeks God.

Trust God – Father Knows Best

The previous two marks of a disciple are unique in that they start with the Father and flow on into the children. Christians love God because he first loved us (cf. 1 John 4:19), and Christians seek God because he never stops pursuing us (cf. Luke 19:10). The third mark of a disciple, however, is where one must start to take an active role in God's work – trusting God. As the adage says, "You can lead a horse to water but cannot make him drink."⁸ That is to say, despite all the wonderful things that God has done for His children, not all easily find they can trust Him. This is, of course, a matter of faith, not a matter of God's power.

⁷ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 196.

⁸ John Heywood, *The Proverbs of John Heyward* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1546), 59

God's power is sufficient for all and always will be. He is the Creator of the Universe and the Father of All. This also means that God knows what is best for His children, even if His children may disagree. The Bible is full of many signs from God, but few show God's willingness to prove He can be trusted as plainly as the story of Gideon. When Gideon was preparing to take Israel's army against the forces of Baal, he wanted to be sure that it was God's will for him to fight. He used a fleece and asked God to show him certainty two distinct times, and God answered precisely as He promised He would (cf. Judges 6:33-40). When God showed Gideon the things he sought, he could trust God fully and bring victory to the people of Israel. A disciple must be willing and able to trust God if they are to live their life the way that God wants them to.

One prominent item, however, is trust is not always easy. God's ways are higher than humans, but simple human minds cannot comprehend God's plan "because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Corinthians 1:25, HCSB). The ability to trust God with everything one has is something that comes from a lifetime of walking by faith. Humans see their situation as overwhelming, impossible, unconquerable, or any other cataclysmic word one might choose. As mentioned previously, it is not a matter of fact. It is a matter of faith. When Jesus and his disciples were in the boat amidst the Sea of Galilee, and a vast storm shook the ship, Jesus was casually sleeping while his disciples and the others on the boat were panicking and fearing imminent death. When the people woke Jesus, he casually walked out onto the ship and told the storm to calm down, and it did (cf. Mark 4:35-41). At that moment, Jesus looked to the people and said, "...why are you so fearful? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40b, HCSB). In a similar story, the disciples were again on the Sea of Galilee (one would think they would be used to this sort of thing) and were facing a

ferocious windstorm. Jesus walked on the water toward them and told them to be calm (cf. Matthew 14:22-27). Jesus' disciple, Peter, asked Jesus to tell him to come and join him on the waves; when Jesus told him to join him, things were fine until Peter looked around and saw the waves crashing around him. Peter sank and thought he would drown, but Jesus pulled him out of the water. When he had retrieved Peter, he disciplined him with the exact phrase as before: "...You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31b, HCSB).

Disciples must make an active effort to Trust God in everything they do. There are many stories throughout history of people who have done amazing things. Though one cannot surmise that all of them are due to a direct desire to trust God, one can see many examples of humans doing extraordinary things because of the power of God in their lives⁹. From the Old Testament, one can find the story of Moses parting the Red Sea, calling water from a rock, and bringing down plagues onto Egypt and countless others (cf. Exodus 14:21-29, Exodus 17:6, Exodus 7-11). Furthermore, God gave Samson the power to crush the Lord's enemies with his final act of faith (cf. Judges 16:28-30). In each of these instances and countless others, ordinary people put their trust in God and accomplished extraordinary things. Even the smallest act of trusting in God can bring about miraculous things, such as the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and knew if she would only touch Jesus' robe, she trusted she would be healed (cf. Luke 8:43-47). When the woman touched Jesus, and he felt it, he could have been angry with the woman, but instead, Jesus lovingly replied: "Daughter." He said to her, "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." (Luke 8:48, HCSB). A disciple knows that they can trust God no matter what happens to them.

⁹ Michael A. G. Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality*, (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2007), 87.

Share God – The Art of Duplication

Christians have a fantastic gift that can mark the difference between life and death. The power of God can turn dead men into armies (cf. Ezekiel 37:1-14), and God can force the Sun to hold still (cf. Joshua 10:12-13). Through the Father's power, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (cf. John 11:38-44) and was later raised to life after his own death (cf. Mark 16:6). There is nothing under Heaven that God cannot control. If one knows such a fantastic thing as a power that does all these things, the desire to share this power with people should be intrinsic. Christians should desire to Share God with anyone they meet, making it the fourth mark of a disciple.

After all of the events that transpired leading to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, the final words of Jesus before he left to be with God were: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20, HCSB). The last thing Jesus told his remaining disciples to do was – make more disciples! This mission, now identified by Protestant bodies as "The Great Commission," is one of the driving forces of evangelical churches the world over¹⁰. Disciples must make it part of their lifestyle to share the Gospel with others to bring another lost sheep back to Christ, who loves them dearly.

But discipleship does not end with just bringing someone to Christ; a disciple must also walk alongside their brother or sister as they grow. This may not mean that the one who led the other to Christ must be the sole guide for the believer (though this certainly can happen); instead,

¹⁰ P. Adam McClendon and Jared E. Lockhart, *Timeless Church: Give Lessons from Acts* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 106.

it means that a disciple must make it their priority to continue investing in their brother or sister – guiding them to resources, teachers, helpers, studies, etc.¹¹. Depending on the gifts one may have been given by God, they may be chosen to lead their new disciple along, or they may be given access to another individual (or a group) that will carry their disciple further.

In some cases, a disciple may not be the one that leads the new friend to Christ; instead, they may be the one that is entrusted by another to lead the disciple forward. In the story of Philip being called by God to speak to the Ethiopian official, Philip is told to meet this man and teach him how to read the scriptures (cf. Acts 8:26-35). The scripture does not tell the reader how this man came into possession of the scroll of Isaiah, just that Philip was commanded to help. After reading the scripture and helping the eunuch understand it, Philip is given the fantastic opportunity to baptize the man because of the work another has done in his life. Because Philip made himself available to share God, the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized and saved from eternal death. Philip did not seek the adoration of the others around him for doing this for the man; he was only concerned for the man’s soul. Disciples must be willing to share God in whatever way they are prompted and solely for the joy of saving another’s life.

Disciples do not need any special permission or gift to share God aside from being willing to do so. While there is nothing wrong with taking evangelism training courses at a church or reading a book like Bill Fay’s *Sharing Jesus without Fear*, the relationship building with others and living a “different” life makes the difference¹². When Paul was choosing the elders he would leave in charge of the various church plants, it was rarely the person’s amazing gift of teaching or preaching that convinced him; it was the way they treated others: “...but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled.” (Titus 1: 8, HCSB). In

¹¹ Reid, *Radically Unchurched*, 189

¹² Rainer and Rainer, *Simple Life*, 163

the case of Timothy, Paul makes a special effort to point out that he wants Timothy to help him because of his faith¹³. Timothy goes on to aid many of the churches with their discipleship and growth because of his strong desire to share God.

What, then, is a good disciple to do to share God? Although there are many ways that one could learn to bring others to Christ, the simplest way is with their testimony. Not everyone is willing to read books of the bible or even give their time to a devotional, but they are likely to listen to the stories of those that they respect. If those stories are about how one was lost in the darkness, and God pulled them back to the light, that testimony will be more powerful than most anything else available to the disciple¹⁴. A powerful quote on this matter comes from William J. Toms, who says, “Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person ever reads.” This quote exemplifies the importance of a disciple’s story in sharing God through testimony. Even without a testimony, sometimes the best a believer can do is to live a life that honors God and hopes that it speaks to others.

Conclusion

The Bible gives numerous examples of what makes one a disciple of Christ. Entire volumes of books have been filled with Christian “How-To” instructions. Pastors have created hours of sermons on the proper ways of Christian life. Each and every one of these items may serve to grow the faith of a disciple in one way or another. Being a disciple requires one to give up their old life and become a new creature in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17); the old is made new, and the new life is filled with abundance. This is the kind of lifestyle that all believers of

¹³ Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near*, 74

¹⁴ Graham W. Hill, “Unsettling the Self: the Paradoxes of Narrative Identity in Christian Testimonial Practice,” *Sociology of Religion* 82, no. 2 (2021): 222.

Christ should seek to attain. Among the many marks that identify one as a disciple of Christ, this paper has focused on four: Love God, Seek God, Trust God, and Share God.

Loving God and Seeking God are two aspects of the plan that flow directly from our Father and are bred into Christian DNA. We love God because He loved us. We Seek God because He always seeks after us. Life can begin to change from the love of God and the pursuit of God.

Trusting God and Sharing God, unlike the previous two marks of a disciple, require humans to make a concerted effort as they are unnatural to human life. One must learn to trust God by allowing themselves to be in a place where God can teach them to trust Him. One must have a heart filled with God's love and trust that God will lead them if they are to find ways to Share God. But only through sharing God can one hope to show they bear the love of God. Amongst all these items, one thing is salient – People will know we are God's children by our love for others.

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