

Why Be Jesus' Disciple

Why would/should someone live as a follower/disciple of Jesus?

What does being Jesus' disciple have to do with receiving the gift of eternal life?

The first question above is one I raised in the Introduction to the section titled "What is a Christian".

If you read that section (see the Introduction), you will recall that a disciple is one who learns from the teacher, lives as the teacher has taught, and eventually becomes like the teacher. In the case of Jesus, discipleship is learning from Him and then putting those teachings into practice so as to be like Him.

At this point, you may have questions like the second one above. What part does discipleship play in our eternal salvation? Can you receive the free gift of heaven without being His disciple? Does simply trusting Christ for salvation make you a disciple – a Christian?

These are not new questions.

Some would say that you HAVE to first be a disciple in order to RECEIVE the gift of eternal life. But since being a disciple is a work and since eternal life is a gift "...not a result of works..." (Ephesians 2:9a), this would seem to be an incorrect view.

According to John, one of Jesus' first disciples:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. 1 John 5:13 ESV

If a person were to die shortly after acknowledging the need for the gift of salvation and that person really had NO time to live as Jesus' disciple, would that person fail to receive the gift of eternal life?

There is no time constraint on receiving the gift of eternal life. You don't acknowledge your trust in Christ and then receive the gift some time later. You acknowledge trust in Christ and the gift is yours. According to the Scripture above, "...you who believe...have..." Discipleship is not a prerequisite for salvation.

But simply trusting Christ for salvation does not make you a disciple and living as a disciple does not mean that you have trusted Christ for your eternal life.

Let's consider these two things one at a time.

1 – Can you receive the gift of eternal life and still not be a disciple?

If a disciple is one who commits to learning from Jesus and following His teachings, then it would seem that claiming to accept the gift of eternal life would not automatically make you a disciple.

When you accept the gift of eternal life, you are agreeing Jesus is the Savior, that you have a need for forgiveness, and that His sacrifice on your behalf was sufficient to pay the penalty for your sin.

Further, accepting the gift should also show that you have an understanding of the character/lifestyle that God desires for His people and that you have a desire to become that godly person. To become that godly person, though, you need to become Jesus' disciple.

Paul, a disciple of Jesus, wrote this:

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? Romans 2:4 ESV

The gift of eternal life and the life of discipleship go hand-in-hand. You receive the gift and, in response to the gift, embark on a new life – the life of a disciple.

2 – Can you live as a disciple without receiving the gift of eternal life?

Well, apparently you can try.

I'm sure you know people who live (or have lived) a “good” life – people that, to all outward appearances, live a life that seems to match Biblical teachings; a life of kindness, patience, helpfulness, and love.

Two things about this may be noted: 1) it may be that some people live a “good” life but leave God totally out of the picture, or 2) in some cases, it may be that that a “good” person is really good at hiding some bad things. It is said that everyone has secrets; things that other people may not see but things that God does see.

Jesus had some warnings for the people of the time (and for us too) - for those who appear to live a “good” life.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Matthew 7:21-23 ESV

And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;’ Mark 7:6a-b ESV

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Matthew 23:27-28 ESV

The people described in these verses have the appearance of disciples but in reality have little or no love for God and harbor attitudes and actions that are contrary to a life of love for others. Chances are they are trying to earn their way to heaven without realizing that entrance to heaven is not based on one's performance.

(It is important to note here that God not only provides eternal life as a gift, He also provides helps as we seek to follow Jesus as His disciples. Discipleship is not a do-it-on-your-own way of living. See the section on Living as a Disciple.)

So, where does that leave us?

Again, the gift of salvation and the life of discipleship go hand-in-hand. If you have sincerely accepted the gift of eternal life, then it is time to embark on the life of discipleship. Up to this point I have suggested four reasons for doing so.

1 – Jesus is God.

2 – Jesus came to Earth and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin and to gain for us an eternal place in heaven which He offers as a gift. Becoming a disciple is our response to His sacrifice.

3 – Identifying with Jesus and following His teachings sets you on the path to becoming a person known to be honest, faithful, helpful, kind, and loving – the kind of person I think most would like to be known as.

4 – Becoming Jesus' disciple shows that you have sincerely recognized the need for God's forgiveness and that, going forward, you have an understanding of the character God wants to see demonstrated in the lives of people. (Romans 2:4)

There are two additional reasons I would give for one to become Jesus' disciple.

Number 5: We are called to become disciples.

One of Jesus' final instructions to His disciples was this:

“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,....” Matthew 28:19 ESV

He told His disciples to go and lead others into discipleship. Jesus called the first disciples and they, in turn, called others to discipleship. And those disciples called others, and so on, and so on to today; to us.

We are called to more than church membership. We are to become disciples; learning from Jesus, living His teachings, and eventually becoming like Him.

Many are called. But not all respond.

Jesus told this parable.

“A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’” Matthew 16:b-20 ESV

There are many reasons one can give for not becoming Jesus’ disciple. The question is whether we will give some excuse and turn away from a life of discipleship or embrace the life of discipleship God has called us to.

Number 6: Living as Jesus’ disciple gives purpose to life.

Matthew 28:19 (above) not only shows the call to us to become disciples. It also shows that we have the task of calling others to discipleship. That becomes our purpose: to bring others into a restored relationship with God.

But calling others to discipleship is not the only thing God has for us to do.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Titus 2:11-14 ESV

Jesus gave Himself on the cross to redeem us - to save us from the penalty for sin AND the POWER of sin in our lives, so that we might live as His people, living upright lives and zealous for good works.

Jesus didn’t come just to reconcile us to God for a future life in heaven. He also wants us to live whatever remains of our lives in a better way; to point others to Him and to do the good works that God has prepared for us; to live as His disciple.

If you have decided to accept God’s gift of the forgiveness of your sins and a place in heaven, then hopefully you have also decided to live as one ready to follow Christ as His disciple – as a Christian.

Being Jesus' disciple does not, however, center around rules. It centers around a relationship with Him.

Read on.

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