

Bite Size Bible Study

The Great Commission #98

By Pastor Lee

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19)

Jesus' final words were those of what we call the Great Commission - to make disciples of the whole world. But what is a disciple? The ancient, Hebraic picture Jesus had of raising disciples was unique to his Jewish culture. By learning about His practice, we can have insight into how Jesus wants us to fulfill his command in our culture.

The culture Jesus lived in was a culture that valued understanding the *Tanakh* (Israel's religious writings up to that time). To become a great rabbi was the highest goal possible, and just to be a disciple of a famous rabbi was an honor. Rabbis taught in synagogues and homes, and outdoors when a crowd gathered. They taught general audiences, and also had a small band of disciples who lived with them and followed them as they traveled from town to town teaching.

A quote from the Mishnah says: *Let your house be a meeting place for the rabbis, and cover yourself in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily. (Pirke Avot 1:4)*

This text gives insight into several stories from Jesus' ministry in the gospels. Mary, Martha and Lazarus opened their home to Jesus in the tradition of showing hospitality toward rabbis and disciples. Their house would also have served as a place for meetings for him to teach small groups. We also read that Mary "*sat at Jesus' feet*" to learn from him (Luke 10:39).

Rabbis were expected not only to be greatly knowledgeable about the Torah, but also to live exemplary lives to show that they had taken the scriptures to heart. The objective of their teaching was to instill in their disciples both the knowledge and desire to live by God's word. It was said, "*If the teacher is like an angel of the Lord, they will seek Torah from him*" (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 15b).

The disciple's goal was to gain the rabbi's understanding, but even more importantly, to become like him in character. It was expected that when the student would become mature enough, that he would take his rabbi's teaching (yoke) out to the community and raise up disciples of his own.

A disciple was expected to leave family and job behind to join the rabbi in his austere lifestyle. The disciples were supposed to be the rabbi's servants, submitting to his authority while they served his needs. Indeed, the word "rabbi" means "my master", and was a term of great respect. Jesus washed the disciples' feet; he was entitled to having them wash his feet, not the other way around. By his actions he was teaching them the lesson of humility; that the one most deserving of being served is serving others. Jesus didn't just lecture; he used his own behavior as an example.

Jesus' Eastern method of discipleship gives insight into what he expected us to accomplish in our fulfilling his Great commission. Our Western model focuses mainly on the gospel as information, and our goal is to be a person of correct understanding. We focus mainly on spreading information about Jesus, not on living our life like him and inspiring others to do the same. Jesus began his Kingdom by walking and living with his disciples, showing them how to be like him. Then they went out and made disciples, doing their best to imitate Jesus and show others by their own example. Jesus expects that his kingdom will be built in this way - as each person grows to maturity, living their lives transparently before others, counseling them on what they have learned about following Jesus. The kingdom is built primarily through these close relationships of learning, living and teaching.

Paul said: *Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Cor 4:15 - 17)*

We can hear that Paul's goal for the Corinthians is that they become disciples - who change their lives to be like Christ, not just learn the correct beliefs. Using rabbinic method, he likens himself as a father to them, and he sends his disciple Timothy, who he calls "his son". He wants them to learn by the example of Timothy about his own way of life, which is a reflection of Jesus' teaching. Paul is using this "whole person" method of evangelism to transform their lives, not just their minds, to reflect the truth.

Through this model of discipleship, we see that Jesus isn't just interested in having our minds. He wants our hearts and lives too. Once our lives reflect what our minds believe, then the belief has actually reached our hearts. Then our passion for following him becomes a loud witness for him, and inspires others to do the same.

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