

What is a Disciple?

Acts 11:26

07/01/2024

Joshua Koura

Camden Valley Baptist Church

www.cvbaptist.com

TRANSCRIPT:

Acts Chapter 11, I'd like us to read from verse 19 to verse 26. "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. The news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a great many people were added to the Lord. Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for the whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people, and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."

Let us pray. Lord our God, we come before Your presence with thanksgiving, with humbleness of hearts, with an attitude delighting in You and ready to receive from You. So with open hands and open hearts, we ask, Lord God, feed us with the bread of heaven, feed us with the Word of Life, and minister to us by Your Spirit that we might grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior. Cause Your church to rise up in strength and vigor, and to take the name of Jesus on their lips, upon their hearts, and to bear their cross and to follow You. We pray, Heavenly Father, that You would revive Your church in this hour, and that we would rejoice in the working of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, both to convince, to convict, and to raise us from our apathy. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

In this text of scripture, we are introduced to a church plant that happened without a particular planter. There was a persecution that came when Stephen was stoned to death that led to a dispersion of the church that went so far as to Antioch, and the believers there were preaching the

gospel, as it says in Acts Chapter 8 or 9, where they were gossiping the gospel, as it were, and they took the gospel far and wide to the point that there were now many believers in a place called Antioch. And when the church at Jerusalem heard about these believers there at Antioch, they sent Barnabas to go and to discover what was happening there at this church. And Barnabas came from Jerusalem to Antioch, and when he came to Antioch, he saw the grace of God and was glad. He saw that what had happened there was truly a work of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of God's saving grace, in so much that these people were filled with joy and gladness. And Barnabas goes on to encourage them to continue, continue in the grace of God, continue with the Lord, and so they did. And Barnabas returns with Saul to show him of the events here that had taken place, and they both were encouraged, and they taught there for an entire year.

And so, we're led into this little church plant over in Antioch by no particular planter, but the comments of Luke that I want us to focus on this morning, and for the next several weeks to come, is the last part of verse number 26. He says there, "And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

If I was to ask the average believer, maybe even yourself this morning, what are some descriptive terms that first come to mind to describe those that belong to Christ, you might answer "Christian," or you might answer "those that are saved," you may answer "those that are in Christ Jesus," "those that are regenerate," "those that know the Lord," or you might use a whole bunch of different synonyms, good proper terms, biblical terms, to describe those who belong to Jesus Christ. But interestingly enough, the Bible describes the Christian more than any other term by the term "disciple," by the term "disciple." This is a very important truth to us that we need to grasp here in this passage: the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. It introduces to us almost a historical shift in the naming of these followers of Jesus. "Christian" is a good name; it describes very well those that do belong to Jesus Christ, and they were first called Christians at Antioch. And Agrippa later on says, "You almost persuade me to be a Christian," and later on, Peter says in 1 Peter 4, he says, "If any man suffer as a Christian." So the term "Christian" well describes those that belong to Jesus, those that are followers of Jesus Christ also.

But one thing that has been lost, if I could say, in our day, or not emphasized as much as it should be emphasized, is the term "disciple" to describe those that are believers in Jesus Christ. The word "disciple" has been lost amongst all the, if I could say, theological labels that now define what Christianity is. Good indeed, of course, Christianity is Trinitarian, of course, Christianity is all the things that we hold to, even many of those

things that we define ourselves by, and not necessarily wrong. We call ourselves Candon Valley Baptist Church because we have Baptist distinctives, for example. And those terms that the history of the church had developed, used to define and to, if I could say, set sort of boundaries of what defines orthodoxy in truth, and these kinds of things are not to be undermined and diminished as unimportant. But there's something about the term "disciple" that takes us back to the early days of the followers of Jesus that actually strikes at the roots of the reality of our relationship to God through Jesus Christ. And what happens over time is that we end up defining ourselves by terms at the expense of these fundamental truths that underline who we are really, who we really are, and who we really ought to be. I believe a disciple is one of those things that have been lost that needs recovery. I'm not talking about just the term "disciple" needs recovery; I'm talking about the understanding that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch, meaning that disciples were Christians, and Christians were disciples.

The meaning of a disciple had common usage in the time of our Lord Jesus and in the first century. They were disciples of Pharisees; the Bible says the disciples of the Pharisees. The Gospels talk about the disciples of John, tells us of the disciples of Christ. In fact, Plato and the philosophers had their disciples, men and women that followed after them and learned their teaching and adhered to their ways. And all these, "disciple" was a common term that was there in the early part of Christianity and beyond that. Not only that, the disciple and the disciple relationship was really defined by the master, meaning that you could go to the disciple of the Pharisees, and the way that the Pharisees would define this master-student relationship would be governed by the Pharisees. So John with his disciples, and so the philosophers with their disciples, they would set for them, you know, certain times of teaching, certain times of practical activities, kind of like an apprenticeship in many ways, where the master tells the student how to behave, what to do, what to believe, what to follow, and they work through things together. And the master always set the standard for what the student was meant to do and meant to be. And Jesus Himself had His own set of standards, if I could say, or expectations for those that really wanted to follow Him.

The meaning of the word plainly refers to one who is a student, one who was a pupil, one who is an imitator or a follower of another. In fact, it's more than just one who sits as a student in a classroom. A disciple was an adherent of a master; he wasn't just necessarily sitting in a classroom. A man by the name of Morris, he quotes this saying, "A disciple was a learner, yes, a student, but in the first century, a student did not simply study a subject; he followed a teacher." There is an element of personal attachment in a disciple that is lacking in a student. There was a personal attachment; the master would call the students, or the students would come to the mas-

ter, and they would follow him, and there was a personal attachment that they had together, that he was an adherent.

Now comparatively, the word "Christian" and "disciple," the word "disciple" seems stronger, if I could say that, and that's probably because of the watering down of the word "Christian" in our day. When you think of the word "Christian," you think of one that belongs to Christ. When you think of the word "disciple," you think of one who is a follower of Jesus Christ. And so the word comparatively is stronger than a Christian. And allow me to illustrate this just for a moment.

You might ask someone who is a friend, or you might even ask yourself this morning, or someone dear to you, or I may even ask you this morning, "Are you a Christian?" And you can answer that question in many ways. You could answer it in the sense that "I'm not a Muslim, I am NOT a Buddhist, I am a Christian." You could answer that question by simply saying, "I grew up in a Christian home, my parents are Christians, my grandfather and grandmother were Christians, and in fact, I have some ministers that come into my family tree, and so yes, I'm a Christian." Or some might go on even to talk about their Christians because they were baptized, and that once upon a time, their parents took them to be baptized, and they were baptized, and or maybe they prayed a prayer and walked an aisle one Sunday or one day at a conference or a meeting of some sort or a camp. And so they will say, "I'm a Christian," and you would have to ask some follow-up questions to really try to understand whether or not these people are true Christians or not.

But if you would ask that same question to those same people, this question, "Are you a follower of Jesus Christ? Are you one that adheres and obeys and submits and follows to Him as your master?" Those very same people that may have answered yes because they were not Muslim necessarily, or yes because they were not baptized necessarily, or grew up in a Christian home, may at that time stop and pause for a moment and ponder, "Am I really following Christ? Am I really following Christ?" And so, as you can see, it is comparatively stronger, and as a term that really strikes at the heart.

And I'm not suggesting that we replace the term "Christian" for "disciple." I'm just simply trying to make a case to help us understand that Christians are disciples. There are Christians that debate what I'm sharing with you this morning, that a Christian is a disciple. There's a false idea that has run its way through the Church of Jesus Christ that teaches that Christians and disciples are unrelated, that a person becomes a Christian, and then at some other point in their experience as a Christian, they decide to follow Jesus, so as to think that they can truly be a Christian without

following Jesus. Or they might divide in and say, "We take Jesus as Savior, but another time in our lives, several years maybe down the track, we may take Him as Lord," as if He is not Lord and Savior. But the Bible teaches us that this is not the case.

The idea of believing on Jesus but not following Jesus is not a New Testament truth. The concept of coming to the cross but not carrying your cross is not a New Testament truth. What is set forth plainly in scripture, that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is the essence of being a Christian, so that it must be said that those who are truly Christians are followers of Jesus Christ. And the scriptural teaching is undeniable.

Jesus tells His disciples in the Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28, He says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," but how does He phrase it for us in Matthew 28:19? That's Mark 16:15. Matthew 28:19, "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I command you." Jesus says to His disciples, "The gospel that you carry is the very gospel that calls men to discipleship. It's the very gospel that calls men to a life of obedience and to a life of cross-bearing and following after Me."

This is also seen in the passage that was read to us this morning concerning the rich young ruler. He asks a vital question, "What must I do to have eternal life?" And Jesus, in essence, after challenging him about the law and showing him that he does not really keep the law, says to him, "Follow Me." And the man goes away sorrowful because he has great possessions. And what goes on from there is that Peter perks up and says, "Lord, we have left everything, and what do we have for doing so?" And Jesus answers that question by saying, "No man that has left father, mother, brother, sister, house, houses, and all these things, possessions, for My sake and the gospel's sake, shall not inherit in this life a hundredfold and all those things again, but in the next life, eternal life." What did Peter have that the rich young ruler didn't have for following Jesus? Peter had eternal life.

This is true also later on when, when the disciples no longer follow Jesus in John 6:66, and Jesus asks them, "Will you go also?" He says, "Where we're going to go? You have the words of eternal life." What we see in scripture is that the call to self-denial and the call to cross-bearing is a call to salvation.

Let me put it this way: Mark 8:34-35, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? And what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" But you know what Jesus said just prior to that? "Whosoever shall save his life shall lose it, but whosoever loses his life for

My sake, the same shall find it." And He talks about in that same passage bearing your cross and denying yourself and coming after Me.

Luke 14:25, Jesus turns to a multitude of unbelievers and says to them, "If any man come will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." In John 15:8, He says, "By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, that you bear much fruit," He says, "and so prove to be My disciples." What is He saying? The life of fruit-bearing gives evidence that you truly are a believer in Jesus Christ, one who belongs and is in the vine.

John 8:31 says the same, "Then Jesus said to those Jews which believed on Him, they believed on Him, but He said, 'If you continue in My word, then are you really My disciples indeed.'" Hang on, they believed on Him, yes, yes, yes, but "if you continue in My word, then are you truly My disciples." You know what He's saying? Your belief is marked by discipleship, and the evidence that you are a true believer is your discipleship, and your discipleship testifies to your faith, so that to put them at opposites to one another is to really say that you do not have true faith, is what Jesus is saying to them.

These passages of scripture teach us, as John 8 does, that those that were not truly His disciples were yet in their sins. Remember, He says that "he that is a servant of sin commits sin," and they said, "Oh no, no, we believed in You." "Yes, but we don't have any sin." He's like, "Ah, okay, I get it. That's not the faith of a true disciple. You're not really belonging to Me." And so, the Bible tells us clearly that the connection between discipleship and salvation is really, in many respects, one and the same.

And let me make a point of clarification, lest you get me wrong: not all disciples are truly Christian, but every true Christian is a disciple. Consider Judas, who was a disciple of Jesus Christ, who followed Him, yes, superficially, yes, in not a way that was truly testifying to his faith. However, he was a disciple nonetheless, right? But the Bible teaches us that he was lost. What about the case of those that said in the last day, or will say in the last day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and cast out devils, and our many wonderful works in Your name?" They were testifying to the name of Jesus, they were following Jesus, doing things for Jesus, and Jesus will profess to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you that work iniquity." And the same is said in John 6:66, to those many of those disciples which no longer followed Him. They were the ones that stumbled at the word of salvation when Jesus said, "I am the bread which comes down from heaven; he that eats from Me shall never perish and never die."

So it's important to realize that just because someone gives the appearance

on the external that they are one of a number of those who are following after Jesus, it does not necessarily mean that they are true Christians. That is important to recognize as we go through this and understand this, that not all Christians are true disciples, but not all disciples are necessarily true Christians.

Another thing that is very helpful to understand is this: that the call to discipleship is twofold, in that it is both theological—they are being called to Christ, and they are being called to follow Him as their master, as their teacher, to whom He says that He is—but not only is it theological, that it is in that sense gospel, but it is also more than that, in that it is practical. It is a call of repentance that includes a repentance, if I could say, a turning from, to follow what I've just described to you is the gospel, is it not? The gospel is the teaching that of the death, burial, resurrection of Jesus Christ, and He calls men to Himself, to turn from sins, to trust in Him. And when a man is called, or woman is called, to forsake all and follow Jesus, that's exactly what's happening: their dependence shifts from themselves and the things which they love to Him, to follow Him, to obey Him, to serve Him.

Lest we misunderstand, is the gospel in scripture is something to be obeyed. Romans chapter 6 verse 17, it says that "that you received from the heart that form of doctrine which I delivered unto you," but he says, "you obeyed from the heart that gospel." Those that will perish in the final day, they are those that "obeyed not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." And so the gospel itself has a call, and the call calls for an obedience, an obedience of faith in Jesus Christ, and a repentance which is granted by God to the sinner, but nonetheless, it is a call which must be obeyed. And this is the essence of discipleship.

You see that everywhere, that those that follow Jesus were not born disciples; they were called to be disciples. If you consider Peter and Andrew as they were fishing, Jesus said, "Follow Me," and they left their nets, and the Bible says, and they followed Him. It was Matthew sitting at the receipt of custom, there as a tax collector, whom Jesus approached, and said to Matthew, "Follow Me," and the Bible says, and he arose, and he followed Him. And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were with their father in the boat with the hired servants, and the Bible teaches us that Jesus said to them, "Follow Me," and immediately after He had called them, they went after Him, they went after Him.

And what is true of discipleship, and what is true of the call to discipleship, is that there is a calling, and that there is a coming. There is a distinct call, and there is a distinctive time. They're not born disciples; there's a distinct moment in their life where they come to Jesus, they come to Him, they

follow Him, they're called to Him. There's a decisiveness about it, there's a marking out as a new beginning. There was a new beginning that day for Matthew, there was a new beginning that day for Peter and Andrew, and for John and James. That was the day that they followed their master, that they learned of Him, knew Him, turned to Him, believed on Him, and that obviously grew as they pursued Him and followed after Him.

As the disciple is a person called, and only the person called is a person instructed. Not only were they called, but they were instructed by their master, that they live the life under the word of their master, learning from Him. In fact, the first reference to a disciple is in Matthew chapter 5, verse number 1 and verse number 2. In Matthew chapter number 5, verse number 1 and verse number 2, the Bible says, "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated, His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying..." Not only is it one that has been called out to Him, but one that is instructed by Him. This is the idea, "If you continue in My word, then are you truly My disciples." They adhere to the word of their Lord, and they submit to the authority of His lordship.

What's interesting about Jesus, compared to perhaps philosophers and others, is that Jesus was a nonconformist. Jesus called people to Himself, but His demands were not necessarily socially acceptable, not to the religious world, but neither even necessarily to the Roman world in many ways. He called them to a single focus, to Himself, and a commitment to Himself. He demanded their all, as we're going to look at in the coming weeks, of examples and times where Jesus called disciples and what that means. But the reality is, what Jesus was establishing was a kingdom which was not of this world. It was not worldly; it was heavenly. It was not subject to the rules and operations of the ungodly, but He is King over His people, was ruling in righteousness and in holiness, and He led them on a path that was in many ways countercultural to what the disciples would have been used to, and what their families would have been used to, and what the societies and people that they hanged around would have been used to. They would have been familiar with discipleship, yes, but this kind, the kind of nonconformity.

You say, "What do you mean by nonconformity?" You just have to read Matthew chapter 5, where He's teaching His disciples, and just keep paying attention to these words. Remember the words that Jesus keeps on saying, what does He say repeatedly, time and time again? "You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you." "But you have heard that it was said, but I say unto you." And He says that multiple times through the Sermon on the Mount. In one way, countercultural to what the people were used to, what they were familiar with, what the Pharisees had been teaching them

about the law. Jesus says, "I haven't come to abolish the law; I've come to establish it. And let me tell you what it means. Let me tell you what it looks like to love God and love your neighbor. Oh, you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, but I say unto you, love your enemies. You have heard that it was said, thou shalt not commit adultery, but I say unto you, whosoever looks at a woman with lust commits adultery with her already in your heart." He goes on, "You have heard that it was said, you know, you can swear and say this and say that, and He goes, but I say to you, let your yes be yes, and your no be no; anything more than this comes from the evil one." And Jesus went and basically just taught His disciples things that would have perhaps shocked the hearers.

Jesus gets even plainer when He comes to the matter of prayer in Matthew chapter 6, and He talks about the pagans that pray with their much speaking, and they talk, and they think they're going to be heard for their much speaking. You know what He says to the disciples? He goes, "Don't be like them." Whoa, what do you mean? "No, I don't want you to be like them. They're pagans; they're of the world; they're not of God. You are My disciples. I've called you out of the world. I've called you to Myself. You're an adherent of My words, My laws. You're following My ways. Don't be like unto them."

You think about that, how revolutionary that would have been, growing up in a cultural context, growing up with things so familiar, and then this master, this man who's a carpenter from Nazareth, comes into your life and says to you, "Hey, come follow Me," and you leave your family, your livelihood, your work, and you come after Him. Whoa, who is this guy? Who does He think that He is? He is the Son of God, the Most High God, dwelling among men, the Lord of all, and He still makes the same call. Isn't this not just merely New Testament? This has been the way of the people of God from all generations. Noah, called of God, saved by God's grace, countercultural, building an ark because of floods coming. Abraham, "Hey, get up, come out of your family, your kindred, and I'm going to show you a place. You're mine, Abraham." Think about it, how it is with all the New Testament, Old Testament, and the New Testament. The children of Israel, in bondage, mighty hand, pull them out, cross the Red Sea, "Follow Me. Here's My laws. You're mine." This is the way of God's dealings with man, and in the last days, He has spoken through His Son in the very same way, "Come, follow Me."

What is a disciple? It's an adherent and a follower of Jesus Christ, Him as Lord, Him as master. What is the danger for us to redefine discipleship so that it's not so countercultural, and to redefine discipleship so that it becomes more palatable to the world around us? And in the coming weeks, we're going to walk through with Jesus through the Gospels, and you put

yourself as one of the disciples there, and listen to the master calling sinners to Himself, and ask yourself, do we demand the same on His behalf today?

I believe the Church of Jesus Christ has become afraid to view Christianity through the lens of discipleship. We're happy to view it through certain theological truths that are so dear to us and do not have any resemblance of a cross for us. How glorious are these truths, and yes, they are, but those are truths for the disciples, the cross-bearers. There are threats, there are things in this world that threaten us away from discipleship, away from this understanding of Christianity. Things like being labeled, the fear of man, being labeled as extreme or radical. I don't know about you, but that's a real challenge, isn't it? We're in the world; we got working with people; we talk to people; we share the gospel with people, and then really, like, can I just cut that part out of the Bible? You know, to call a man to take up his cross, and that's too extreme. Surely that is too extreme. What's the message of Jesus? It's the call of Jesus.

How many times have we been tempted to adjust our lives so that we don't look so extreme to the things that we know we need to be doing for the Lord? Things that the Master has told us, of certain crosses that we ought to bear, certain paths that we are to tread, that are a little bit too narrow, and that we know that if we do so, we may be walking alone. The word of the Lord still comes to us, doesn't it, through the words of Jesus: "Take up your cross, follow Me."

How often have we felt that perhaps the calls and the demands of the gospel of repentance and faith in Christ alone, how does that go down in the pluralistic society that talks about many ways to God and everyone has their own religion? Doesn't go down too well, does it? "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father but by Me." Ouch, really, Jesus, You said that? Yes, I did, and He also said, "If any man does not bear his cross and follow Me, he cannot be My disciple."

We're afraid of how the gospel might sound. We want to make the gospel successful, so sometimes we turn it down a little bit. Wrong. God makes the gospel successful; it's His gospel. He gives the increase. What about the fear of loss? How the Christian Church has become so materialistic, and we're afraid of loss. Maybe we've fallen for the old heresy that we suppose that gain is godliness. But Timothy's report reminds us in the book of Timothy that we brought nothing into this world, and we're certainly going to take nothing out of it, and that gain is not godliness. In the face of the prosperity gospel, in the face of, you know, living a life of health, wealth, and always self-preservation, have we ignored these parts of the scripture that call us to a life of self-discipline and loss?

That God will demand of us things that perhaps are most dear to us. Maybe we've become too narcissistic. So that's only for those narcissistic people that are in authority. No, we're all a little bit narcissistic, aren't we? We're lovers of self. Narcissus was a figure in Greek mythology who went around, and he didn't find any love, as it were. You know, this lady, this other lady tried to like him, and he didn't like her, and she loved him, and all this. It's a myth, but his work at the idea from one day, he came to a pond, and he looked in the pond, and he saw his reflection, and he was like, "Wow, it's really beautiful," and he loved himself so much. It's a myth, but there's many kinds of myths of this, that some people say that he wasted away staring at himself and died. Others say he stared at himself so much that he fell into the pond and died. But nonetheless, the lesson is clear that a narcissist loves themselves. And what does Jesus say about that? "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me." It's not about self-preservation, is it? It's about the glory and kingdom of God.

Let us not avoid self-denial. Let us not undermine the claims of discipleship. But in closing, let us remember the words of this hymn: "Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own His cause, or blush to speak His name?" The challenge comes to us this morning: Are we true disciples of Jesus Christ? Let us pray.