

Discipleship Ingredients

A sermon written by Rev. Dr. J. Richard Short at the Deer Creek

Presbyterian Church, Cumming, GA

Jan. 25, 2026, based on Matthew 4:12-23

I have noticed that many Christian preachers and writers are saying that they no longer use the word Christian to refer to themselves.

They say that the word Christian has too many connotations. One can speculate why that is. It may be because of the scandals associated with many well-known Christian preachers such as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Baker. Or the opulent lifestyles of other TV preachers like numerous prosperity gospel preachers.

Many of these current preachers prefer to describe themselves as “followers of Jesus.”

If you had to choose one word or phrase to describe your own Christian identity, what word or phrase would you choose?

The more I think about it, I am convinced that the best single word to describe a Christian is the word “disciple”.

There are many other good words one may use. Words such as ambassador for Christ, or citizen of heaven come quickly to mind. But the word “disciple” seems to me to be the best single word to describe someone who is trying to follow Jesus.

Do you remember Jesus’ last words to his disciples in Matthew 28? “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

So, are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? Have you ever thought what would be the job description of being a disciple of Jesus Christ? What are the ingredients of being a disciple of Jesus Christ?

The gospel lesson for today lifts up for us four ingredients of being a disciple.

The first ingredient is to decide to be one. Notice if you will the word “immediately.” In verse 20. After calling them, Peter and Andrew left their nets and “immediately” followed Jesus. And in verse 22, James and John “immediately” left their boat and father, and followed Jesus.

Here comes this stranger, he calls, and four fishermen, two sets of brothers, leave everything, nets, boats, and family, that’s radical enough. But they do so immediately.

I’m more impulsive than I should be. But this offends even me. I’ve had “look before you leap” and “count the cost before you begin” driven into my thick skull enough to be put off by these four fishermen just taking off and leaving everything at the beck and call of a total stranger.

How does one account for this bizarre behavior? Maybe Jesus had such a magnetic and charismatic personality that he just swept those four off their feet. Yet Jesus doesn’t seem to have that effect on others. Maybe those four had an extraordinary amount of faith. But if you read all four gospels, you’ll see that the disciples had the same struggles with faith that we do, maybe even more. If either one of those things were true, it would leave most if not all of us in this sanctuary and online out in the cold when it comes to being a

disciple. Not many of us are willing to leave everything we have to follow Jesus, especially the first time we heard of him.

All the commentators I have read agree on a third explanation. The four fishermen leaving their nets, boat, and family did not do so with such reckless abandon as it looks. Jesus had talked to them beforehand, and they had time to think about it and to consider the alternatives and cost of following Jesus.

This explanation not only lets us into this story, because this is how we, most of us, would react, but it also opens up a whole new insight into what discipleship is all about.

With this understanding, the word “immediately” means that when Jesus came to ask for a decision, their decision to follow him was made cleanly and swiftly, with little if any hesitation. Jesus had planted the seed earlier and this time, when he approached, he wanted any answer.

Where are you in your walk with Jesus? Are you at the stage where Jesus has been planting seeds in you all of your life? My hunch is that you would not be here this morning if you are stuck at the planting seeds stage. My hunch is that by your very presence here this morning, you have already said “YES” to Jesus when he came to you and asked you to follow him, to be a disciple.

So the first ingredient of discipleship is to decide to be one. If you haven’t made that decision yet, this morning is as good of a time to do it as any.

If “deciding” is the first ingredient, then “leaving” is the second ingredient.

Now we have another problem. We don't like leaving what we have. And even when we get to the point of wanting to leave, because we are creatures of habit, we find it difficult to leave even when we want to.

What is it that we are being asked to leave? The four fishermen left nets, boat, and family. Together they represent what one writer calls the Trinity of the American religion: career, standard of living, and family. To leave your career, to forgo your standard of living, to walk out on your family – WOW! That's serious business. I doubt if anyone in this room or online is ready to take that step. If that's what this passage is all about, then few, if any, of us can get beyond this second step ingredient of discipleship.

But look at it this way. This American Trinity that we worship: career, standard of living, and family. Any one of those three can possess us as the demons possessed people in Jesus' day. People today possessed of demons of career and standard of living are called workaholics. Workaholics are so seized by these demons that they neglect other values which they claim to revere.

They say that they work hard for the sake of their family, but their families experience is one of feeling deprived of their need for the time, attention, and affection of the breadwinner. In some cases the family comes to dread the workaholics' next promotion, for that next promotion exacerbates the tension of a higher standard of living, yet seeing the workaholic less. When two workaholics are married to each other, it is possible for them to, in effect, divorce one another and orphan their children while sustaining the outward forms of marriage and family.

Literature abounds with stories of people who have begun with noble intention – to work hard to support their family, but along the way to financial security the aim shifts from “making money to provide for family” to “making money in order to make more money.” One way to see the similarity of this and demon possession is to recognize two things:

1. Money never satisfies ultimately, and
2. No matter how much money one has, it is never enough.

Our only hope is in Jesus, who is stronger than the demons, whether they be first century demons, or the demons of the modern industrial and information society. A new life, a fresh beginning, is possible for Christians with enough residual sanity to recognize this stronger Jesus. Jesus is stronger than this modern programming of our lives which want to put ultimate loyalty on career, standard of living, and family, and not on God.

This leaving of the nets, boat, and family for these four fishermen does not mean for us the actual walking away from them. What it does mean for us is that no longer will we put our ultimate allegiance there. No longer will they be the ultimate goals of our lives. No longer will they be our gods, and no longer will we worship only them. Salvation for 21st century Christians lies down the road of repenting of our religious devotion to the world’s work and believing instead that following Jesus is the main business of our lives.

This, of course, is not to say that career, standard of living, and family are incompatible with discipleship. They can be incompatible if we treat them as gods. But they can be, and must be, vehicles of

discipleship. All who will, may follow Jesus while they remain at their work and in their families.

The first ingredient is deciding.

The second ingredient is leaving.

The third ingredient is the most important, but I am only going to briefly mention it. It's following. Without a Jesus to follow, there would be no compelling reason to drop what you are doing when the call to follow Jesus comes. Everything depends on Jesus really being there for one to follow. The essence of discipleship is keeping company with Jesus. Being with Jesus - tapping into the wellspring of his awesome and graceful presence, sharing the adventure of his mission – that's what makes the risk of leaving nets, boats, and families worth it.

The first ingredient is deciding.

The second ingredient is leaving.

The third ingredient is following.

The fourth ingredient is fishing. Jesus finds four fishermen and calls them to be fishers of men. This play on words is a dramatic way of saying that attention should be shifted away from the business of this world to the business of God. The life purpose of a disciple is to share life with Jesus so that the experience of being with Jesus rubs off and reproduces itself in the life of another. That is to say that the real vocation, or calling, or business of a disciple is to so share his or her life with Jesus that someone else will come to share his or her life with Jesus also. I know of an architect who learned this lesson.

When asked what he did for a living, he replied, “My job is to be a disciple of Jesus. I earn my living by being an architect.”

When we examine the gospels closely, we notice that discipleship is the device by which the ministry of Jesus is multiplied and reproduced. One person encounters Jesus and he or she goes away and tells others, and then they tell still others and sooner or later we’re seeing crowds of people instead of four or five.

To summarize, disciples go to work primarily to be agents of sharing life with Jesus rather than to be servants of a career that promises a higher standard of living. True success at work, in discipleship terms, depends on the “catch”. That is, how many people hear the call to discipleship at work or neighborhood or garden club or golfing friends.

The calling of a disciple today is to multiple the kingdom of God in and around your work or social group through prayerful witness and action. Another way of saying this is what while disciples may appear on the surface to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, salespeople, or mechanics, that is only their cover. Their true identity is being disciples of Jesus. Their true work is handling the nets of the kingdom.

Through this passage, I firmly believe Jesus is calling all of us, myself included, to be disciples of Jesus. And the way to respond to that call is

1. To decide, to say yes.
2. To leave your ultimate allegiance to worldly values.
3. To follow Jesus, by sharing your life with him and letting him share his life with you, to seek his will, not your will. And,

4. To fish for people, by sharing your life with Christ with them, to enable them to share their life with Jesus.

Decide, leave, follow, and fish. Four ingredients of being a disciple of Jesus. May God bless you in your journey.