

CONNECTING TO REFLECT THE CHARACTER OF JESUS



learning from the vine

a 10 day study on discipleship
from John 15:1-17

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Why Discipleship?

the REASON WHY
DISCIPLESHIP is SO
IMPORTANT



Jesus' final words

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

These are the words that Jesus left ringing in the ears of the disciples as he rose up into the clouds and returned to Heaven. At the heart of this, is the command to "go and make disciples".

Notice that Jesus does not want his followers to focus first on baptising people, but on making them disciples —then the disciples can be baptised.



Problems from baptising before discipling

Unfortunately, many times people have been baptised before they have become disciples. There are many sad consequences to this. Many baptised people never learn about becoming a disciple, with many believing that knowing

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that God exists and that Jesus died for them is enough to get them into Heaven. But unfortunately it is not. We go to Heaven not just because we believe some important truths, but because we have a real relationship with the One who is truth.

Many others try to live as Christians but Christianity remains theoretical and God seems distant. They do not experience the transformed lives that the Bible promises. Jesus remains an important person, but he does not become their close friend. People can become frustrated, often legalistic, and even quite critical of themselves and others. They are desperately trying to live according to the ways of Jesus, but do not have his power to do this, because such power only comes when our relationship with Jesus is real and constant. Ultimately, many people become so frustrated that they leave the church or turn their back on God completely. And this is happening over and over again.



Can you think of any other problems that can occur when people get baptised before they learn to become a disciple of Jesus?



Discipleship from John 15:1-17

So how can we understand what being a disciple is all about? It would be really helpful if Jesus had written down a 10 point plan on how to become his disciple, but this is not what the Bible gives us. Instead, the Bible gives us lots of different descriptions, parables, pictures, and symbols, to

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help us understand this very important subject. In this study, we are going to look at one particular symbol that Jesus uses to explain how discipleship works. It is the parable of the vine found in John 15:1-17.



Before you go any further, read John 15:1-17.

Much has been written about the parable of the vine. But in the next three sections, we will look at what the parable of the vine teaches us about fundamental principles of discipleship to Jesus, so our relationship with Jesus can be real and deeply meaningful for our lives today.



From what you have read in John 15:1-17, how would you define a disciple of Jesus?



The Goal of Discipleship

**the GOAL of DISCIPLESHIP
is to REFLECT the
CHARACTER of JESUS**



What is the purpose of the vine?

Jesus says “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit...” (John 15:5). Jesus then concludes this passage, “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” (John 15:16) It is very clear that the vine exists for the sole purpose of bearing fruit.



From what you see in John 15:1-17, what do you think the fruit is?

Jesus says, “This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:8) Jesus is saying that when we tell people that we are Christians, their natural response would be something like, “Of course! I just knew there was a greater power working in your life.”



How people see God in us

But how will people notice this? Think about your family. How do people recognise that you are related to your parents or siblings? Even before you open your mouth, people often see who you are related to by looking at your face, by your attitudes and actions. It's the same with us and Jesus. The same characteristics that can be found in the face and heart of Jesus, can be found in his disciples.

If you think of a real vine, the sap that keeps the vine alive comes up the vine and out into the branches. When this sap works it's way along the branch, grapes begin to grow—not apples or tomatoes! When we are linked as branches into Jesus, his own nature will flow into us. The result is that we will bear fruit that looks like him—his patience, sacrifice, compassion etc. We will have in us the nature that is in him. The inevitable consequence is that we will reflect his character. This is the fruit that our Father is looking for.



What has been the goal of your life up until now? How does the importance of reflecting the character of Jesus challenge the way you think about your life and goals?



The Result of Discipleship

the FATHER is HONOURED by
OUR DISCIPLESHIP to JESUS



The consequence of fruit-bearing

What is the consequence of our discipleship that bears “much fruit”—of truly reflecting the character of Jesus? In John 15:8 Jesus declares, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” Notice that fruit bearing glorifies our Father.



Read John 15:8 in your own Bible. What do you think it means to glorify the Father, and why do you think this is so important to Jesus?



Why our Father is glorified

As we will explore in a later section, one of the most wonderful personal consequences of reflecting Jesus, is joy. We experience joy, and so does God! However, in the context of sin and the battle that Satan is waging against God, we could say that the greatest consequence of reflecting Jesus today is that our Father is honoured. For this confirms to the world that God is really who he claims to be—a God of love and peace.

Consider the background to the Bible story for a moment. When Jesus created the world (Colossians 1:16), he created us to live in a deep and personal relationship with him. Like with Adam and Eve at the very beginning, we were created to live in the visible presence of God where we could talk with him face to face. But tragically, the temptation that caused Adam and Eve to sin caused our intimate relationship with God to be broken.

Indeed, throughout the whole history of our world, Satan and his angels have been battling against God and his angels. Satan's desire has been to rule instead of God (Isaiah 14:12-14) and as with Adam and Eve, Satan is trying to cause everyone born on earth to turn with him against God. Ever since Satan tempted Eve with the words, "Did God really say..." (Genesis 3:1), he has been trying to tempt us all to doubt God's word—to doubt that God is loving, full of grace and compassion, and desiring us to live with him in Heaven. Indeed, today perhaps, the greatest temptation Satan brings is to doubt that God exists—that God is not real at all.



How we honour our Father

When we reflect the character of Jesus, we honour God in two ways:

1. **God is honoured in the eyes of the Universe.** It is so important to remember that before Satan left Heaven,

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Satan accused God in front of the whole Universe of being unfair and unloving, and that they would be better off following him. So when we reflect the love, joy, and peace of God's character, our lives become the evidence to show the Universe that Satan is a liar.

- 2. God is honour in the eyes of those around us.** When we reflect the character of Jesus visibly to those around us, people will know that God is not dead or harsh as Satan is claiming, but real, alive, and full of love for us. When our lives reveal God's love within us, our lives automatically become witnesses to hope. While our world and its future is safely in God's hands, it is a world which appears dominated by Satan and his angels. When we look around, there does not appear to be much hope. But a Christian which is living out the character of Jesus will stand out clearly as we "shine like stars in the universe". (Philippians 2:15) That means -- that our lives will attract people to the hope we have -- to the reality that the Father is real and compassionate.

This reversing of Satan's influence in our world is why I think Ellen White wrote,

*The greatest work that can be done in our world is to glorify God by living the character of Christ.
6 Testimonies, 440*



Have you ever thought about your life being a testimony to the honour of the Father, visible throughout the Universe? What are the implications of this for you personally?



How Discipleship Works

**REFLECTING the CHARACTER of
JESUS is AUTOMATIC WHEN we
are CONNECTED to HIM**



The importance of “remaining”

Notice something important in the parable of the vine. Jesus does not tell his disciples to go and make fruit—he urges them to “remain in him.” In fact, the word “remain” in the Greek is repeated 11 times in this chapter, and 40 times in the book of John. Jesus is emphasizing that bearing fruit is the natural consequence of remaining connected to himself.



Look up all texts in John 15:1-17 where the word “remain” is used. What can we learn about how discipleship works from these verses?



What happens when we don’t “remain”

If we try to bear fruit without first being connected to Jesus, we will get frustrated because there are no connection points for his power to enter into us. We will always have the goal

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in front of us, but never the ability to reach that goal. Jesus' calls us to focus on connecting to him so that his power can automatically flow into us, enabling us to be alive and fruitful.



An example of connecting

Connecting to Jesus is a little like an electric lamp connected to a power socket. If the lamp becomes unplugged from the wall the light will go out immediately. However, it is tempting sometimes to think of ourselves more like a battery operated car that gets charged up, and then runs around until the batteries go flat. We connect to Jesus in the morning and think that this will give us power for the whole day. But the moment the car is disconnected from the battery charger and begins to run, its batteries are constantly losing power. If this is the case with us, we can easily get into trouble when something difficult challenges us through the day.

We will only reflect the character of Jesus as long as we are connected to Jesus—the only one who can give us his character. We're just like the branch and the vine. For the moment the branch becomes disconnected from the vine, the branch and its fruit begins to die. The fruit may appear to be healthy on the outside for a short time, but inside it is already beginning to rot. That's why Jesus insists, "apart from me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5) Therefore, our connection with Jesus must continue constantly.



It shouldn't be stressful!

You may think that this is hard or stressful. In one way it is, because being constantly connected to Jesus goes against the habits that we have developed. However, the benefits are worth the effort. Bearing the wonderful fruit that gives our lives meaning and witnesses to the greatness of our God will begin to appear in our lives automatically. We don't have to get agitated and frustrated trying to look like Jesus. We just

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have to make sure we are connected to him, and this process will begin to happen all on it's own as the nature of Jesus flows into us. Remember the simple light bulb. It does not have to try to give light. It just has to have the switch turned on and the power will make the light shine. This is exactly what God does through us.

How we connect to Jesus so that his character is revealed in our lives is what the next section will explain.



If fruit bearing is automatic, does this mean that living as a disciple of Jesus is easy? How would you explain your answer?



Connection Point 1

CONNECTING to the MIND of
JESUS THROUGH his WORD



How do we connect to Jesus?

As Jesus explained the vine to the disciples, he repeatedly stresses the need to be intimately connected to him by urging them to “remain” (NIV) or “abide” (KJV) in him. But how do we connect to him? In John 15, Jesus highlights four connection points that enable us to remain connected to him, so that his nature flows into us.

We know Jesus because he has spoken to us. By speaking to us, Jesus has revealed what is on his mind—his thoughts and desires for us. When we understand and obey those words, our minds that were originally disconnected from him through sin in Eden, are being reconnected to his mind. This is why Jesus wants his words to live in us. He wants us to learn about his plans, purposes, and promises for us, as well as the values, principles and laws that his kingdom is built upon.



Why the words of Jesus are important



Read through 15:1-17 again in your Bible. What does Jesus say his words do in our lives?

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This words of Jesus accomplish many things. Here are four things they do:

1. **The words of Jesus clean or purify us from sin:** *“You are already clean because of the WORD I have spoken to you.”* (verse 3)
2. **The words of Jesus provide the basis for receiving his blessings:** *“If you remain in me and MY WORDS remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”* (verse 7)
3. **Obedying the words of Jesus enable us to enjoy the pleasure of Jesus:** *“If you obey MY COMMANDS, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”* (verse 10)
4. **Obedience to the words of Jesus is the basis of his friendship with us:** *“You are my friends if you do what I COMMAND.”* (verse 14)

Of course, you will notice that in these texts the idea of the words of Jesus being inside us does not mean that his words sit in our thoughts only. Rather, they are to shape the way we live. If the thoughts in our minds do not shape our actions, they become worthless.



It is possible to know the words of Jesus but still not be connected to him. How is this possible, and how would you counsel someone in this situation?



Connection Point 2

**CONNECTING to the HEART
of JESUS THROUGH our
INTIMACY with HIM**



Longing for a relationship

Discipleship is not about living good moral theory. It is about a living relationship with a person. This experience involves not only our minds, choices, and activity for God, but also our hearts. As Moses urged God's people, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Such love for Jesus is at the centre of Jesus' teaching about the vine and our connection with him.



Read through 15:1-17 again in your Bible. What words would you use to describe the type of relationship that Jesus wants to have with you.

Here are three ideas from the text about the type of relationship Jesus is looking for with us:

1. **Jesus wants to love us, and for us to love him:** *“As the Father has LOVED me, so have I LOVED you. Now remain in my LOVE. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my LOVE, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his LOVE.”* (9-10)
2. **Jesus desires his own joy to be in us so we may have joy ourselves:** *“I have told you this so that my JOY may be in you and that your JOY may be complete.”* (11)
3. **Jesus desires that our relationship with him be intimately personal, not distant or theoretical:** *“You are my FRIENDS if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you FRIENDS, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”* (14-15)

Jesus is not looking for a business relationship with us. He longs to be with us, and for us to be with him.

In the Psalms, David expresses his own desire for intimacy and oneness with God. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” (Psalm 42:1) To have this desire for intimacy with Jesus, is to share the desire for intimacy that Jesus has for us. To share this desire is to connect to the heart of Jesus.



To what extent do you carry this desire for Jesus as David is shown in Psalm 42:1? How could you deepen your own heart-felt longing for Jesus?



Connection Point 3

**CONNECTING to the WILL of
JESUS THROUGH our CHOICES**



Discipleship is a choice

Jesus never forces himself or his ideas on us. In describing the choice we have to connect with him in the parable of the vine, Jesus begins with the word "if" four times.



Read through 15:1-17 again in your Bible. What does Jesus say our choices determine?

Here are four ideas about the power of our choices from this text:

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1. **My choices determine my ability to be fruitful** (to reflect the character of Jesus) *“IF a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit...”* (verse 5)
2. **My choices determine my eternal destiny:** *“IF anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”* (verse 6)
3. **My choices determine my answers to prayer:** *“IF you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”* (verse 7)
4. **My choices determine my intimacy with Jesus:** *“IF you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”* (verse 10)

If we choose to follow Jesus, we will be learning how to submit our wills to the will of Jesus. Each time we choose to obey the words that God has given to instruct us in the ways of his kingdom, we will be reconnecting our own will to the will of Jesus.



To what extent are you making conscious choices about being a disciple of Jesus? To what extent do you think your discipleship to Jesus is dependent upon your own choices?



Connection Point 4

**CONNECTING to the WORK
of JESUS THROUGH our
SACRIFICIAL SERVICE**



Connecting to others

Fruit bearing—reflecting the character of Jesus—is not a private experience. By its very nature, fruit bearing is involved with serving. In John 15:12-13, Jesus explains that remaining in his love depends on our loving others in practical ways,

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.



Read John 15:12-13 in your own Bible. What do you think Jesus wants us to learn from these texts?

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Serving others through sacrifice was Jesus' main focus when he was on earth, and even now, he is organising the whole of Heaven to be at work in saving as many people on earth as possible. So connecting to Jesus means that we will be connecting to the work that Jesus is doing, and desires to do all around us—saving other people and bringing them into the same intimate relationship with him that we enjoy.

However, as with Jesus, this work can only be done when we are willing to sacrifice to serve others.



How easy is it for you to sacrifice for others? What enables someone to be willing to sacrifice for another, even when it is inconvenient or painful?



Discipleship Alone?

**GOD INTENDED us to
GROW and MATURE in
COMMUNITY**

While Jesus is always with us, and has everything we need for a fruitful and meaningful life, we will certainly meet challenges when we seriously begin living as his disciples.



Challenge #1

The first challenge is ourselves. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, each of us are born into the world with a natural tendency to live in opposition to God and the ways of his kingdom. As David laments, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5) So by the time we begin to choose to follow Christ, we already have many sinful habits which are deeply engrained within us that are difficult to undo all at once.



Challenge # 2

The second challenge is our supernatural enemy. As Paul clearly identifies, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12) We cannot compete against such a supernatural enemy who has supernatural power by ourselves. We are therefore continually in need

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of supernatural power, and this only comes from outside of ourselves—from God.

So how do we deal with these challenges as we pursue our discipleship to Jesus? Solomon gives some helpful and practical counsel from his long experience,



Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. What does Solomon want to teach us in these verses? How can this teaching be applied to supporting each other in our discipleship to Jesus?



The importance of spiritual support

Having support from others is important in all areas of life, but it is particularly important in our spiritual lives. This is why God created us to live as Christians in the community of the church, so that we will be continually surrounded by others to encourage and support us. Indeed Paul says that it is when we are working together as a body that we

*“become mature, attaining to the whole measure
of the fullness of Christ.”
Ephesians 4:13*

We need each other to grow!

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How about you, as you pursue a life dedicated to reflecting the character of Jesus? I would suggest that you don't try to do this alone. Find someone who can journey along with you, so you can encourage and support each other, and particularly to pray for each other.



Who could journey with me?

To help you find someone who can be an encouragement on your spiritual journey, you might want to spend some time in prayer, and consider the following questions:

1. Do I want a more mature Christian to mentor me, or someone at the same level of spiritual maturity as I am?
2. Who can be a spiritual encouragement and support to me—and who could I spiritually encourage and support?
3. Who do I feel comfortable with, and whom I can trust?
4. Is there someone who can give me good advice, like a pastor or a good friend?



Who could journey with me, so we could encourage and support each other?

Continue to pray for God's guidance, that he may bring the right person or people into your life for the purpose of growing together spiritually.



Planning My Journey

**my LIFE WITH GOD MATURES
BEST when I CONSCIOUSLY and
DELIBERATELY LIVE for HIM**



Be prepared!

Preparing for Heaven has always been important. But with the signs of Jesus' soon return all around us, living to honour the Father by reflecting the character of Jesus is of great significance.



Remember to count the cost

Yet Jesus does not want us to follow him without counting the cost — because the cost of following Jesus is everything we have and are (Luke 14:27). Before we follow him, Jesus wants us to carefully consider if we are willing to pay that cost.



Read Luke 14:25-30. What might be the cost that you will have to pay if you are going to decide wholeheartedly to be a disciple of Jesus?

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If won't happen by accident

Once we have carefully thought about this, and are willing to pay such a cost, the rest of our lives are devoted to honouring God by reflecting the character of Jesus to the world. Yet reflecting Jesus' character does not happen by accident. It only happens by our deliberate decisions that are shaped by the Bible and empowered by the Spirit. Remember, if we are not born again by the Spirit each day, our human tendency is always to go against God. And with Satan and his angels always ready to turn us away from God's kingdom, living for God requires that our minds and hearts be alert and ready for action.



How to make a Connection Point Plan

The next pages are Connection Point Planning pages. They are designed to help you focus more clearly on growing stronger in one of the four connection points that connect you to Jesus and who he is.

Begin by asking God about his goals and plans for your life. Then, fill in a Connection Point Plans sheet with the following information: (There is a sample Plans sheet next with examples.)

1. **The length of your plan.** Choose a beginning and end date to help you focus on your plans. The time could be as long or as short as you wish.
2. **Your goal.** There is a space for you to choose a goal that relates to one of the four connection points—connecting to the mind of Jesus through his word; connecting to the heart of Jesus by pursuing intimacy and oneness with him; connection to the will of Jesus by making good choices; connecting to the work of Jesus through sacrificial service.
3. **Your action plans.** It's easy to have goals, but much harder to achieve them! Write in specific things you

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can do to begin accomplishing God's goals for your life.

- 4. A self-evaluation.** When you come to the end of the current plan, ask yourself, "How have I grown in reflecting Christ?" What were my best successes and why was that? Did some things not work out? Why was that? Never forget that we often learn most from our mistakes, so don't be discouraged if things don't always work out as planned. God will still be with you. He is making all the resources of Heaven available to you to grow to become like him.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.
Ephesians 3:20-21

SAMPLE

my Connecting Point Plans



From June to September I desire to strengthen my connection with Jesus by developing discipleship plans to reflect the character of Jesus in the following area(s):

- the mind of Jesus through studying his words
- the will of Jesus through making good choices
- the heart of Jesus through developing oneness and intimacy with him
- the work of Jesus through sacrificial service for others



My goal is to:

Deepen my prayer life with God



I will try to accomplish my goal by:

1. To spend at least 10 minutes praying when I wake and

before I sleep.

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Paul, Ephesians 2::10, NLT

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2. To ask Jenny if she will pray with me once a week.

3. To study Paul's prayers in the New Testament to learn more about his priorities when praying for others.

4. To ask my spiritual mentor to pray that the Holy Spirit will give me an increased desire to pray, and to enjoy spending time in God's presence.



Evaluation: How did my plans work out this time? What worked, what didn't, and what I can learn for the future?

I found I began to pray a lot more than usual. God is becoming a lot more real to me than before—which is really great! And I much more conscious of his presence now.

This was the first time I tried a plan like this. I finished some things, but ran out time with others. I think I will try and complete the things I didn't finished when I do the next plan.

Dearest friends, you were always so careful to follow my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away you must be even more careful to put into action God's saving work in your lives, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.

Paul, Philippians 2:12-13.

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my Connecting Point Plans



From _____ to _____ I desire to strengthen my connection with Jesus by developing discipleship plans to reflect the character of Jesus in the following area(s):

- the mind of Jesus through studying his words
- the will of Jesus through making good choices
- the heart of Jesus through developing oneness and intimacy with him
- the work of Jesus through sacrificial service for others



My goal is to:



I will try to accomplish my goal by:

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Paul, Ephesians 2::10, NLT

L E A R N I N G F R O M T H E V I N E



Evaluation: How did my plans work out this time? What worked, what didn't, and what I can learn for the future?

Dearest friends, you were always so careful to follow my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away you must be even more careful to put into action God's saving work in your lives, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.

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