

Discipleship 101: What Is A Christian?

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[0 : 00] Well, welcome here for this Sunday, February 6th. And this morning, we're starting a new sermon series called Discipleship 101. And through this series, we're going to be looking at the importance of discipleship, both in our individual lives and in our life as a church.

Perhaps, I would say that most people would be aware of a series of books, I think they're still made, called Four Dummies, the series, right?

It's got a yellow cover. It's got a little cartoon guy in the bottom corner. And there's everything for dummies. So I had friends in university who would buy Canadian history for dummies because they wanted to have a step up on the rest of the class.

But it started, that series started in 1991, that book series. It was a particular computer programming language that started that series.

That was the first book. And so, obviously, our series is not called Discipleship for Dummies because there are no dummies here. But it's important for us, with the same perspective, to recognize discipleship is important.

[1 : 17] So what is it and what does it mean? Well, we're going to recognize a lot of different aspects of discipleship over the course of this series, and we'll dig deeper into them together.

But let's recognize something right off the bat about the word discipleship. If you read this in my little blurb in the newsletter about the sermon this week, the word discipleship never occurs in the Bible. Shocked? Questioning my judgment? Well, it doesn't. Disciple does, but discipleship, a process of growing and becoming a disciple, it's not named by that name.

It never occurs in the Bible. And the other thing, too, is that word in English is relatively ambiguous, I would say, right? It can mean my discipleship, so my personal journey, my own pattern of following Jesus and trusting him and learning from him.

Or it can mean my role in helping others to become disciples themselves. In the sense of walking with someone as they learn from Jesus and grow in their relationship with him.

[2 : 28] Does that make sense? So not only are we on a discipleship journey ourselves, hopefully we're being disciplined by someone else, and we also have the opportunity to disciple others.

It's pretty neat. It's a pretty rich aspect of Christianity. Athletes are always training. So maybe that's easy to recognize right now because the Winter Olympics are on, and maybe you're watching them on TV.

But athletes are always training. And while that may be because they enjoy aspects of their training, aspects of the training itself, training is a means to an end.

And athletes are constantly training because they recognize that they're on a journey. They want to continue to grow and to learn and to improve.

And friends, discipleship is like that as well. It's a journey of growth and learning for us as individuals. But it's also a journey we take together. As I said, as we're both disciplined by others, and then we seek to encourage and support other people in their own journey.

[3 : 41] So this morning we're beginning our deeper exploration of discipleship with a sermon called, What is a Christian? Maybe you think you have all the answers, and we can just wrap it up right now.

In 2006, maybe you know Anderson Cooper. Anderson Cooper is a news anchor on CNN. And he's the host of a program that still airs regularly on CNN called Anderson 360.

And in 2006, Anderson Cooper hosted a special, Exploring Christianity. And he interviewed many people. So obviously 2006, I have no time machine, but thank you YouTube.

You can actually go onto YouTube and watch. It's broken into chunks, and you can watch this series. So I'm going to give you teasers here. I watched it, the full special, and it was interesting and

enlightening.

The perspective that it gave on what people perceive Christianity to be. Or what it means to say that someone is a Christian. Political leanings and creation care.

[4 : 49] That was reflected. Views on sexuality and reproduction. Not surprisingly, also reflected. Eschatological or end times obsessions.

There was a section that focused in on that. Or the prosperity gospel. So these were a few of the themes that Cooper's special highlighted as being some of the ways people might perceive Christianity.

Or what it means to be a Christian. So are you familiar with man on the street interviews? So these were more common. They're not as common these days.

But years ago, talk shows like David Letterman or Jay Leno or Merv Griffin sometimes. You know, now I'm really reaching back. But they would have segments on their shows when they would literally go out onto the street outside of their studio.

And they would ask people questions about specific topics. Is that familiar? Do you remember those experiences? And usually, quite often, the questions were for entertainment value.

[5 : 53] To get the audience to laugh. But very often, you'll also see serious questions asked. Man on the street interviews. And they're often conducted.

You see it all the time on the news. They're conducted during newscasts as reporters seek to learn what the average citizen thinks about a specific topic. And public opinion surveys and focus groups are also similar to that.

They're designed to gauge what people think about certain things. But if you asked 30 different people their opinion on something, how many different opinions do you think you would get?

28. 30. Quite likely. You're right. People have opinions on everything. Don't we?

Don't they? Whether you're pointing the lens at yourself or not. People have a personal opinion on every topic or issue under the sun. Quite often. And you'll also realize quite quickly that they tend to think their opinion is?

[7 : 01] Correct. Right. Exactly. And over the past two years particularly, it's become very clear to us that the pandemic is polarizing in terms of people's opinions.

Isn't it? Human beings having opinions is far from a new thing. People have opinions about everything from music and movies to pizza and politicians.

Too much cheese. Not enough cheese. I lean more left in this issue. I lean more right in this issue. And some people's opinions are correct. They're factually correct. But not always.

At least that's my opinion. So what if we conducted some person on the street interviews and asked the question, what is a Christian?

Oh boy. Well first, I think we'd receive a lot of opinions and perspectives, wouldn't we? Some might surprise us.

[8 : 02] Others might be pretty intense. Pretty aggressive. Pretty negative. Others might be totally neutral. Very vanilla in their response.

And we might all know someone or several someones who either have a neutral perspective on Christianity, as I've said, or have very negative opinions.

And those opinions may sadly have been formed by negative interactions in their lives with people who claimed to be Christians. It's sad.

But from a neutral or even somewhat positive perspective, here are a few of the things that we might hear. A Christian is someone who believes in a higher power.

The person might even say God. Someone who says that God is out there watching over us. That might be a Christian. Or a Christian is someone who tries to do the right thing.

[9 : 00] Tries to treat other people right, at least as best they can. Or a Christian is someone whose good qualities may hopefully outweigh their bad qualities. Or they seem to try and help other people occasionally.

Christians seem to be nice sometimes. Or maybe Christians aren't supposed to judge people. At least that's what I heard. Maybe they're someone who believes that Christians believe people should live and let live.

Don't judge other people. Or a Christian is someone who gives money to church. I like what this organization does. I'm going to give them some of my money.

And people may think Christians seem to do good things. Seem to believe in organizations that also do good things and give money towards that.

Or maybe people would say a Christian is someone who has been baptized. Right? I've been dunked. I've been sprinkled. I've been whatevered. I've been through catechism or confirmation or whatever class.

[10:04] And I've got a piece of paper that proves that happened. Maybe that's someone's definition of a Christian. Or I'm a Christian because I've done all the church stuff.

I've checked off the boxes. Box today is attended church. I prayed today too. That's another box checked. So maybe you've heard some of these perspectives before.

Right? Maybe you've even thought them yourself at times. But are any of those perspectives really at the end of the day what it is or what it should be to say what is a Christian?

Well, guess what? The best place to learn what a Christian is is the Bible. Bless you. And hopefully we can agree that the Bible is the book for Christians.

Right? It's the book for anyone who wants to know more about Christianity. Christianity. And the Bible tells us about itself. It speaks about itself. It says in the Bible that it is, the Bible itself, is inspired by God.

[11:09] It tells us that God speaks through its words, the Bible. So if there's a true definition, a definitive answer to what is a Christian, it ought to be in the God-inspired, God-speaking Bible.

Right? Is that fair? Not a rhetorical question. You can nod. So we're going to be looking at Acts 11 verses 19 to 26 this morning. So if you want to turn to that in your Bible, you can.

Or I will read it now. But we're going to begin to look for the answer to this question. What is a Christian? Acts 11, beginning at verse 19. Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

[12:29] He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.

So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

The word of the Lord. Verse 26 says that people were first called Christians, using that term, in Antioch.

Right? We just read that. So if these were the first Christians at this time in this place, maybe their story can answer our question, what is a Christian?

Can we look at the experience of these people and find out what made them Christians, by definition? And, logically following that, can what made them Christians be the same thing that can and should make us Christians as well?

[13:37] I believe it is. In Acts 11, verse 20, we read, just a moment ago, that people heard the what about Jesus Christ? The good news.

So what's the good news? Well, you have to start with some bad news. There we go. And I've said to you before, I like to start with vegetables first, and then dessert after.

So here in Acts 11, verse 20, we hear the good news, right? So the bad news. All human beings are on God's bad side due to sin.

God's made it clear in the Bible that the right way, the holy way, to live is to live as God wants us to. Because He is God.

God. His parents say to children, why? Because I said so. He knows what's best for us to live our lives in a way that has meaning and a way that has purpose.

[14:46] But, more bad news, we've failed to live as God wants us to. We've intentionally disobeyed God, and we continue to do that. And that pattern of behavior is called what?

Sin. The Bible says the wages of, or the result of, or the payback for sin is death.

So to summarize, the bad news this morning is that we're sinners, and we've been sentenced to death. Now, here is the good news, my friends.

Grace. God holds us accountable for our sin. But He loved us, and He... Grace of God.

But He loved us, and He still loves us so much that He has made a way for us to come out from under that death sentence.

[15:50] He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to bear the punishment for our sin. Jesus gave Himself willingly and took His place, took our death sentence on our behalf.

Took it on Himself. The good news is that we can be forgiven of our sins in Jesus Christ. We can live with God not only now, but forever because of Jesus.

Amen? So now let's look at Acts 11, verse 21. And I'm going to look for somebody to answer this question for me.

When it tells us that these people did what in Acts 11, verse 21, what did they do first? They believed, right, is the first.

They believed. So what was it they believed? They believed the good news, which I just told you about, about Jesus Christ. And they believed it more than just in their minds.

[17:07] It wasn't just a head knowledge that they absorbed. Oh, that's an interesting fact. I'll write that down. But they took it to heart. They put their trust in Jesus, we understand, in Acts.

God was at work in their lives, helping them to see the truth. Helping them to accept it and believe it. And it's important to recognize that when we hear the good news about Jesus, we have what? A choice. A choice. The Bible says that God draws us to him. He will work in our hearts so that we can hear the good news, so that we'll have that opportunity.

But we still need to make a choice. We either choose to believe, or we choose to walk away.

Have you chosen to believe the good news of Jesus Christ? You might say, well, I'm sitting here this morning, aren't I?

[18:18] My friends, only you know where you stand with Jesus. Only you know whether the good news of Jesus Christ has truly changed your life. Or not. Whether you believe in your head, perhaps.

But maybe it hasn't changed your heart. And ultimately, it's not my opinion that matters. So continuing in Acts 11, verse 21, we read, and I think Carol said this a moment ago, we read that these early Christians, after they believed, what did they do?

Carol, I think you're right there. Thank you. They turned to the Lord. They believed and they turned. So when you turn, it means what?

Well, in a basic sense, it means going a different direction, right? And we've considered over time together, the biblical word repent. We've considered that before. Which means, does anybody remember?

Extra huge points if you remember. Three words. Repent means what? Anybody? No. Repent means what? To do differently after.

[19:32] That's what the word repent means. It's that simple. It doesn't just mean turn away. It means to turn away with purpose and conviction. To do differently after.

Repenting means recognizing who we are and the direction in which we were headed. And admitting to God that we were going the wrong way.

Repenting means turning to the direction that God wants us to go. And so when we hear the good news, which we've heard again this morning, when we believe in Jesus Christ in our hearts, when we come to the point and recognize how deeply God loves us, I believe we will want to change our direction.

We'll turn from a self-centered life to a God-centered one. So we've learned so far that these early Christians believed and they turned to God.

And then we read in Acts 11 verse 23 that they experienced God's grace. They experienced the grace of God. And we've talked about God's grace as well many times in the past.

[20:49] And maybe, I'm not holding my breath, but maybe you'll remember a few years ago, a few years ago. Pastor, I can't remember yesterday. Maybe you'll remember in a short series we had on grace.

Hopefully this will be familiar. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Do you remember that? And not getting what you do deserve.

That's what grace means. Does that make sense? I'll say it again. Grace is getting, receiving what you don't deserve, and not receiving what you do deserve.

By living without God and against God in our lives, we've rightfully earned, we're rightfully earning the death sentence we should receive.

It's what we deserve for what we've done. But God offers us his amazing grace. It's not just a song title. A way that we can receive what we don't deserve, what we couldn't possibly earn for ourselves.

[21 : 58] And it's only when we turn to Jesus that we can receive and experience the grace of God. And the best part about God's grace, it's not only for when we die.

It's not only for delivering us from eternal death. But that's a huge part of it. But it's for living right now. Living in God's constant forgiveness.

So returning again to the early Christians in Acts 11, 26. And if someone is following in their Bible, I won't pick on you again, Carol.

If someone's following in their Bible, can you tell me what happened next? What happened to those people next? Acts 11, verse 26. Everyone's so shy.

They became disciples, it says. Disciple. Well, it's maybe an unfamiliar word for lots of people and sometimes even for Christians.

[23 : 03] I think we tend to say, well, disciples, there's 12 of them. And I know a couple of the names and that's it. Those are the disciples. Well, my opinion is that we don't use that word, disciple, or consider it enough.

Which is why we're going on this Discipleship 101 journey together. Because this is about us being, continuing to be, disciples ourselves.

And I have a confession to make. I was considering offering a discipleship course here at the church on a weeknight or on Zoom on a weeknight. But Leah and I talked about it.

You can blame her. And I said, I don't know that engagement would be that high. And she said, I think it would probably be near zero. Hopefully not. But I think you'll come to agree with me that the topic of, the subject of discipleship deserves top billing.

It's a central focus of our lives as Christians. And so it's a Sunday morning thing. So this morning, I believe we've learned that those early Christians in Acts chapter 11, they've heard the good news of Jesus, right?

[24 : 15] They made a choice. They believed what they had heard. They repented. They turned towards God and turned away from what they had done, been doing.

And they received God's grace. And we also recognize that those early Christians became disciples. That's the word, right?

And we'll be exploring that more deeply together next week in our sermon titled, Guess What? What is a disciple? But in essence, a disciple is what?

Any guesses? Audience participation. What's a disciple? Person who loves the Lord. A follower. Teacher.

Oh, that's good. So a follower, a teacher, someone who loves the Lord. A follower is solid. Christian disciples are, to what Donna said, followers of Jesus Christ, right?

[25 : 19] There's that next piece. When we believe, when we trust, when we turn to Jesus, our journey isn't supposed to stop there. And I said, I reflected on this at one point to somebody, and I said, receiving Jesus into your life is not like waiting for a bus.

So you don't receive Jesus in your life and then sit and wait for heaven. Heaven could be, well, it should be any minute now. I'm just waiting.

I'm looking. Heaven could be any time. We were called to go, right? That's what Jesus was very clear about. So by God's grace, we are called to follow Jesus, to seek to live our lives with his life as an example, to develop a personal relationship with Jesus that encourages and sustains us our whole lives.

So I believe we've at least, to some extent, answered that question, what is a Christian, this morning? So my follow-up question then for you is, based on what we've learned together this morning, are you truly a Christian?