

## ***Finding God through the Word***

*John 8:31-32 (see also John 15:7, Matthew 28:18-20, Matthew 7:24-27)*

Would you know how to answer the question, “Are you a disciple of Jesus?” Do you know what a disciple is and how you can tell if you are one? It’s very important to know whether or not you are in fact a disciple of Jesus because He calls every single one of His followers to be His disciple - not as a way to prove ourselves but as a way to be fruitful and fully alive.

Today we’re going to look at a passage of Scripture that gives a very simple way to tell whether or not you are a disciple of Jesus. In John 8:31-32 Jesus says that you can tell whether or not you are a disciple of His by how to relate to His teachings (and by extension the teachings of the entire Bible). Today we wrap up our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting experience by talking about “seeking and finding God through the Word.”

We begin with John 8:31.

31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;

Jesus explains how to tell whether or not a person is a true disciple (vs. a superficial disciple or someone with a temporary interest in Him). The term disciple means “learner” - someone who is actually learning from a teacher/rabbi. A disciple of Jesus is someone who is learning from Him how to live the same type of life He lived.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Jesus says “*If you **continue/remain/abide** (as it’s translated in chapter 15) **in My word**, then you are truly disciples of Mine.*” If we are truly disciples, Jesus’ teachings occupy a place of prominence in our lives. Jesus’ teachings won’t be an afterthought. We won’t dread spending time thinking and talking about His teachings. We will gladly and wholeheartedly do whatever it takes to ensure that His teachings become the dominant influence in the way we think, speak, and act. We will be hungry to learn from Jesus how to live like He lived. ***If we are truly His disciples, our deepest desire will be to cultivate the mind of Christ so that we can live like Christ.***

Let me give you an example of how this works. In the summer of 2014 I was able to do something I never thought I’d be able to do. If I had had a bucket list, this would’ve been on it: I spent a week one-on-one with Pete Galbert. Pete is one of the premier Windsor chair makers in America. I’d read his chair making blog and watched his YouTube videos for years. When I went to his shop outside of Boston for that week, I went as a disciple/learner; I didn’t go to challenge his techniques or to teach him anything. I went as a disciple to learn. Pete was my rabbi/teacher/master craftsman.

Here’s a photo of Pete:



For a video of Pete demonstrating for me how to use a travisher (a curved spokeshave you use to round out the seat of a chair), see archive of 1/26/20 worship service (<https://www.faithmanhattan.org/watch>).

It looks so effortless, doesn't it? That's how you can tell if somebody is really good. As he's working, he's explaining all sorts of interesting things - things I really, really wanted to learn: how you hold the travisher, how to read the grain of the wood so you know what cuts to make, how you know when to stop using one tool and move on to the next, etc.

As Pete's enthusiastic disciple, my goal was to learn as much as possible so that I could imitate him when I got home. I took pictures and videos and notes of all sorts of techniques and tools. In the context of making Windsor chairs, ***I wanted the mind of Pete*** so that I could make chairs like Pete. Over the past 5+ I have continued to remain/abide in his teachings. I can still hear him telling me, "You don't need to put a death grip on that spokeshave; relax and hold it naturally and let the blade do the work. . ."  
***Because I have continued in Pete's word/teaching, I am truly his disciple.*** If I had spent a week with him and then ignored his teaching, I would not be his disciple.

Jesus' point in John 8:31 is that we are truly His disciples if (and only if) we continue in His teaching. We do this by reading and listening to His teaching, mulling it over in our minds, talking about it with others, and seeking to live it out. You can be a moral person w/o abiding in Jesus' teaching, but you cannot be His disciple. You can be a solid church-goer without abiding in Jesus' teaching, but you cannot be His disciple. Why?

Because a disciple is one who is actually learning **from** Jesus how to live **like** Jesus, and that doesn't happen if we don't abide in His word.

Down in verse 37 we read that Jesus confronted some in the crowd with these words:

37 “. . . you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.”

Even though they had a superficial belief in Jesus (verse 31), they were not true disciples because His word had no place within their hearts and minds. By definition, a disciple learns from Jesus by allowing His word to abide within them. [See NOTE #2]

In verse 32 Jesus says that those who continue in His word experience freedom:

32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

When we abide in Jesus' teachings, we progressively come to know the truth **experientially**. You can master the contents of the Bible without coming to know the truth experientially. In Jesus' day this was true of the Pharisees (see John 5:39-47). They were scholars who had mastered the content of the Hebrew Bible; but when YHWH showed up as a flesh and blood man they wanted to kill Him. They studied the Bible but they completely missed God.

By contrast, Jesus tells us that if we abide in His teachings, we will know the truth experientially: “. . .and the truth will make you free.” If you keep reading you see that Jesus had in mind freedom from sin. The promise here is that when we continue in Jesus' teachings, eventually we experience the power and reality of His teachings to the point of being freed from the bondage of our sin.

Let me give you an example. In the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 5) Jesus talks extensively about how to treat people who have wronged us, offended us, even persecuted us. His teachings are diametrically opposed to what you will hear in the world. There you will be told that your anger is justified, that insulting people who wrong you is totally fine, and that you have every right to treat people the way they've treated you. By contrast, Jesus says we should treat other people - especially those who have wronged us - the way **God** has treated us. Since He causes the sun to rise on His friends and enemies and since He sends rain on His friends and enemies, we should be gracious to both our friends and enemies.

When we hear this teaching, we agree in principle. But when we consider those who've wronged us, this teaching seems completely unreasonable. We convince ourselves that Jesus' teaching doesn't apply to us in relation to those who've wronged us. At this point many Christians will walk away from Jesus' teaching, feeling fully justified in their anger and insults. And instead of freedom, they are in bondage to their thoughts of bitterness and retaliation and unforgiveness.

But some will abide in Jesus' teaching about loving their enemies, blessing those who curse them, being gracious to friends and enemies alike. They will have the same

mindset I had when I spent that week with Pete: “I’m the disciple; Jesus is the Master. He knows a zillion times more than I do about human nature, God’s kingdom, abundant life, and everything else. Therefore, I will not abandon His teaching; I will abide in it until I have the mind of Christ so that I can live like Christ who loved His enemies and prayed for them.” I am describing a person who is truly a disciple of Jesus and who will come to know the truth experientially. That person will experience genuine freedom.

These verses teach that ***we are truly Jesus’ disciples when (and only when) we abide in His teaching.*** Our conviction from Scripture is that ***it is the will of God that all believers in Jesus live as His disciples.*** Abiding in Jesus’ teachings isn’t for a select few. Jesus envisioned all those who believe in Him to be disciples. And He empowers us to live as disciples.

Given this reality, how would you evaluate yourself? Ask yourself the question: ***Am I truly a disciple of Jesus?*** Are you seeking to make Jesus’ words (and the rest of Scripture) the dominant influence in your life? Or, if you’re honest, would you have to say that Jesus’ teachings have relatively little influence in your life? I’m not asking whether you are abiding in Jesus’ teachings perfectly. I’m asking whether you can honestly say that are seeking to have the mind of Christ by abiding in His teachings.

No doubt we’re in a number of different places. Some of you would probably say, “I’m not yet a believer in Jesus, so I’m not abiding in His teachings.” Others would say, “Actually I am abiding in Jesus’ teachings and experiencing more and more freedom in my life.” Others are somewhere in between.

What really matters is not where you are right now; what matters is what you do next - whether you engage your will and pursue being a disciple or whether you shrug your shoulders and remain complacent. In a few minutes, I’ll share some ways we can pursue living as disciples wherever you are in relation to Christ. But first I want to share briefly three ways that Scripture benefits our experience as disciples/learners. Hopefully these will motivate you to invest the time and energy in engaging the Word.

***Prayer.*** (John 15:7) After developing the imagery of the vine and the branch, Jesus says this:

7 “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

That sounds a bit dangerous, doesn’t it? But only if we fail to understand the radical transformation that takes place within those who abide in Christ and who allow His words to abide in them. Think of it this way. . . The Father could safely say to Jesus, “Ask whatever you wish and it will be done for You,” right? His unique Son was so likeminded that Jesus had the freedom to ask whatever He wanted. There were occasions where Jesus didn’t ask for things, not because He couldn’t but because He knew it wasn’t the will of the Father. When the Romans came to arrest Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said that He could have asked for an army of angels to make short work of the Romans, but He didn’t. God wasn’t in heaven nervous that

Jesus would ask Him to give something that would sabotage the plan to die on the cross for the sins of the world.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have this same confidence toward those who abide in Jesus and who allow His words to abide in them. Progressively their desires and therefore their requests align with the will of God.

**Mission.** (*Matthew 28:18-20*) In these verses Jesus makes clear that His teaching/ words are central to the church's mission.

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Only disciples can make disciples. The only people who can "teach others to observe all that Jesus has commanded" are those who abide in His teachings. Those are the people who can come alongside others and explain, "Allow me to explain how I have learned to love my enemies and how it brings you freedom." Or, "This is how I've learned to do my work 'heartily, as for the Lord, rather than for other people.' This is how your work is an opportunity to love your neighbor as yourself - customers, coworkers, vendors, etc."

Only disciples can make disciples because only disciples have the motivation to "go." Only disciples have the depth of conviction necessary to share the gospel convincingly. Only disciples have the experiential knowledge of the truth that equips them to teach others to obey Jesus' teachings.

**Perseverance.** (*Matthew 7:24-27*) At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells a parable to impress upon His hearers the consequences of putting into practice or not putting into practice what He's been teaching.

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. 26 "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall."

Both men heard the teachings of Jesus. But only the man who "acted on them" (i.e., put them into practice) weathered the storm. It's been said that "If you live long enough you will suffer." If you haven't already, you will experience hard things in your life that make you want to give up. Jesus claims that the determining factor for whether we stand or fall is whether or not we hear His words and act on them. This stability/perseverance is one of the great benefits of living as a disciple of Jesus.

I hope these benefits of being a disciple of Jesus get your attention and motivate you to abide in the Word.

**Next Steps:** Let's talk about "next steps" - ways that we can learn to abide in Jesus' teachings. There are many ways to learn how to abide in Jesus' teachings. But I do want to mention two opportunities.

1. **Rooted.** We refer to Rooted is "a 10-week discipleship experience" because it's designed to help you begin **experiencing** the rhythms of following Christ. You will be able begin learning how to abiding in Jesus' teachings (as well as prayer, service, and a number of other practices). Rooted is a great opportunity no matter where you are in your relationship with Jesus. If you're not yet a believer, Rooted would be great for you; if you've never read or studied the Bible before, Rooted will give you some tangible ways to begin; if you are already a disciple of Jesus, Rooted will allow you to go deeper in your discipleship. We don't offer Rooted because we want to keep people off the streets at night. We offer Rooted because Jesus calls us to "make disciples" who have established habits of seeking God through the Word and prayer and community.
2. Upcoming sermon series in the book of **James**. Beginning next week we are going to begin teaching through the book of James. It's tempting to come and passively listen. . . or not come and have a hit-or-miss attitude toward hearing God's Word taught. We would suggest that during this series on James you come each week with the mind of a disciple, eager to learn from Jesus and put it into practice. James stresses how genuine faith affects our everyday life. He covers topics such as trials, the tongue/speech, wealth and poverty, faith and works, etc. If you hear these teachings, think/pray about them, talk about them with others, you will come to know the truth experientially; that truth will lead you into freedom in these areas of life. Someone reminded me that the last time I preached through James (22 years ago), I encouraged people to memorize the entire book of James during the sermon series. I'll issue the same challenge/invitation this time: I'd encourage you to consider memorizing the book of James (in whole or in part) as we teach through it. There's no better way to abide in the teachings of Scripture than to memorize it so that it's with you 24/7.

Jesus calls us to be His disciples. He really couldn't have been more clear: "If you continue in My word, you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."