

The Disciples in Matthew

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As we have done with the other major terms in the Great Commission so far, the book of Matthew itself provides the understanding of how disciples are to be made. Since “make disciples” is the primary verb in the final commission it is not surprising that “disciple” is far more central in Matthew than in the other synoptic gospels. “The term occurs seventy-three times in Matthew, compared to forty-six times in Mark and only thirty-seven times in Luke. It is, in fact the only name for Christ’s followers in the gospels” (Bosch1997:73).

While it could be argued that there were other names for Christ’s followers in the gospels (see Appendix A and B), Matthew does use the term more than Mark and Luke. According to the NIV concordance, the count is Matthew, 70; Mark, 44; Luke 31; John 58; and the book of Acts, 24. The epistles do not carry the term μαθηται.

The form is almost always in the plural and first appears in Matt. 5:1 in the introductory verse to the Sermon on the Mount: “Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him.” The disciples not only listened to Jesus, they “followed him” (8:23) which would demand denial of self and cross-bearing (16:24). John the Baptist also had disciples who asked Jesus concerning fasting (9:4) and His work as the Messiah (11:2,7). The first time the “twelve” disciples are mentioned is in Matt. 10:1 when Jesus commissions them to go the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Disciples were closer to Jesus than his own mother and brothers (12:49) and they often asked him questions in private to gain instruction (13:10; 20:17; 24:3).

The disciples helped Jesus in His ministry to the people when they took the loaves from Jesus and fed the 5000 (14:19) and 4000 (15:36). The disciples at times also impeded the ministry of Jesus as when they urged Jesus to send the

5000(14:15); the Canaanite woman (15:23) and the children (19:13) away. Because of their lack of faith, they could not cast the demon out of a young boy (17:19).

They were also slow to understand Jesus' words regarding the cross (16:21) and after He predicted their denial, they declared their undying loyalty (26:35). Although the disciples slept (26:40, 45) and fled (26:56) Jesus promised to meet them in Galilee (26:32) where He had called the first disciples to follow Him (4:18-22).

The Focus of the Ministry of Jesus

From this overall survey of the concept of disciple in the book of Matthew, several general observations of just how Jesus made disciples emerge. In a general sense it could be said that the disciples were the primary focus of Jesus during the heart of His ministry. In a chiastic form, Jesus both begins His earthly ministry by calling the disciples in Galilee of the nations and ends it by commissioning them in Galilee to go to the nations.

Because of Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing ministry the crowds follow Him (4:23-25) and increase until they become too large for Jesus Himself to handle (9:35-38). In apparent response to the petition to send out more laborers into His harvest field, the Lord commissions His disciples to go and minister like He had done (10:1-42).

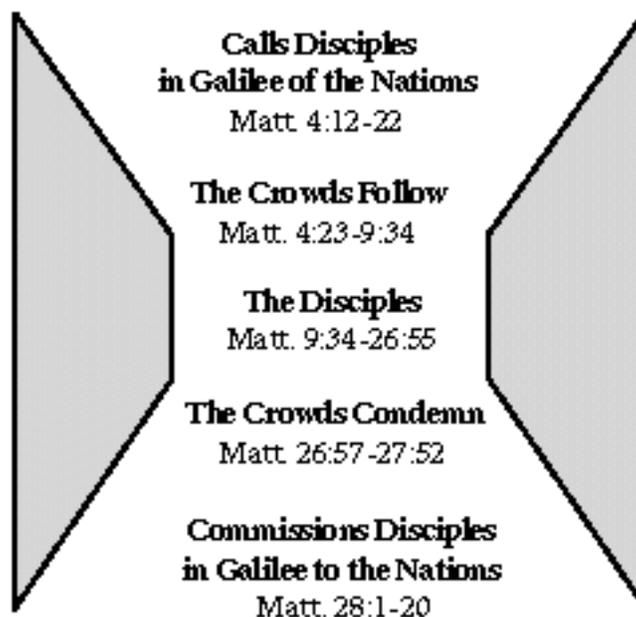
The commission in Matthew 10 marks an important turning point in the focus of the ministry of Jesus. Before this the disciples are only mentioned nine times. From chapter 10 onwards they are mentioned sixty-one times. It is apparent that Jesus chose to focus on the twelve disciples during the very heart of His ministry so that they would be equipped to carry on the word and works of Jesus after the resurrection.

Despite the united and best efforts of Jesus and the disciples, the crowds come again to the fore at the end of the gospel to lend their voice to the condemnation of Jesus. In several ways Matthew seeks to distinguish between the crowds and disciples:

In several occasions Matthew uses the term to make the μαθηται distinct from the οχλοι. The μαθηται were seen as a more intimate group of companions in Jesus' ministry (9:19), and were also his fellow-workers in the ministry of caring for the οχλοι (9:36-37). The μαθηται were purposely held up as an example to the οχλοι (12:49) and were on opposite ends of the spectrum of spiritual understanding (13:10). Finally, as separate groups, they were aligned together against the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' denunciation of the latter (23:11). (Wilkins 1988:141).

The focus of the ministry of Jesus could thus be diagrammed in this way:

THE FOCUS OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS



“Although they follow Jesus, the οχλοι never exhibit the twin prerequisites of discipleship: cost and commitment. . . . Jesus preaches, and teaches and heals them, but they nowhere exercise faith in Him” (Wilkins 1988:170). Jesus wants individuals to come out of the anonymous gatherings and make a faith commitment: “When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. (17:14-15).

Despite the united and best efforts of Jesus and the disciples to convert the throngs that gathered around Jesus, the crowds at the end of the gospel lend their voices to the condemnation of Jesus. Like the anonymous crowds, Matthew most often presents the disciples as a nameless, faceless, collective unity. In contrast to this is Matthew’s very personal portrayal of Peter which will be dealt with in the next section.

The Discipling of Peter in Matthew

That Peter is the most prominent disciple in Matthew is clear. He was both the first one called (4:18) and the first one listed among the twelve (10:2). “He is the only named disciple to be emphasized” (Wilkins 1988:223). Although Peter is the leader of the disciples, “he is never detached from the group” (Wilkins1988:215).

After his denial, Peter is de-emphasized near the end of Matthew and is blended back in with the rest of the disciples as they receive the Great Commission. In his gospel, Matthew pictures Peter in a number of settings as a real-world example of both an exalted and struggling disciple:

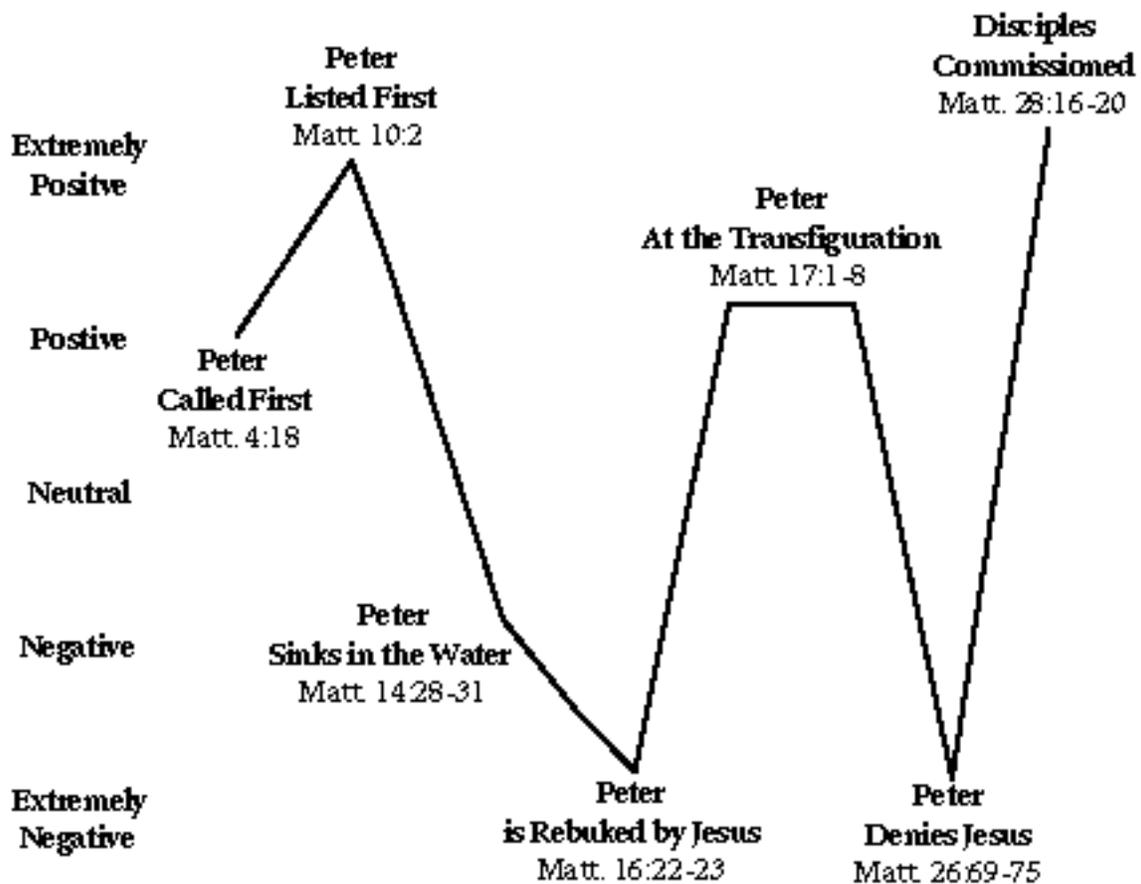
Peter is both a positive and negative example of a disciple. He is a very human disciple whom Matthew has presented as a model for all the disciples to follow. He is an example of exercising faith (14:28), confessing Jesus(17:24-27). In even more cases he is the example of what not to do: disciples should not take their eyes off Jesus (14:30), should not be a stumbling-block (16:23), should not seek earthly

rewards (19:27), and should not deny Jesus (26:69-70). Even with all the highs and lows of Peter's prominence, he is characterized by Matthew as a very real, very human, quite exemplary disciple (Wilkins 1988:211).

The ups and downs of Peter's training in Matthew might be traced like this:

CHRONOLOGICAL GRAPH OF PETER IN MATTHEW

(Adapted from Wilkins 1988:240)



In a very general sense we have seen how Matthew pictures the disciples in general and Peter in particular. This group of individuals, as distinguished from the crowd, have committed themselves to follow Jesus. The disciples are the focus of the ministry of Jesus and it is through them that the Lord proposes to reach all

nations. Just how the disciples were to “make disciples” is the topic for the next section.

Making Disciples

The verb μαθητεω (to disciple) occurs only four times in the New Testament with three of them occurring in the book of Matthew. The only non-Matthaen verse is found in Acts 14:21 which says, “They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples (μαθητεῦσαντε).”

In Matt. 13:51-53 the emphasis of the verb is on understanding the principles of the kingdom:

‘Have you understood all these things?’ Jesus asked. ‘Yes,’ they replied. He said to them, ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed (μαθητευθει;”) about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.’

Matt. 27:57 tells us that Joseph of Arimathea “had himself become a disciple (ἐμαθητεῦθη) of Jesus.” David Bosch gives a helpful summary of the usage of this verb in the Great Commission:

The most striking use of the verb μαθητευειν is encountered in the ‘Great Commission’(28:19). It is also the only instance in which it is used in the imperative sense: μαθητευσατε, ‘make disciples!’ It is, moreover, the principal verb in the ‘Great Commission’ and the heart of the commissioning. The two participles ‘baptizing’ and ‘teaching’ are clearly subordinate to ‘make disciples’ and describe the form the disciple-making is to take(1997:73).

It was shown in chapter four that because Jesus was a faithful disciple at His baptism (3:13-16), in the wilderness (4:1-11) and during His Galilean ministry (4:12-17), He was given the authority to make disciples. Jesus begins His discipling of others by extending a special call to Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John(4:17-

22). After the twelve disciples are discipled they are then commanded to go and make disciples of the nations.

Any consideration therefore of making disciples in the book of Matthew must include three items: 1) The discipling of Jesus; 2) The discipling of the Twelve and 3) The discipling of the nations. The following table outline show these three discipleship sections in the book of Matthew might be understood under the three headings of “Calling,” “Following” and “Sending.”

MAKING DISCIPLES IN MATTHEW

	Jesus	The Twelve	The Nations
Calling	The Baptism of John	The Invitation of Jesus	Baptizing
Following	Obedient in Word/Deed	Taught by Word/Deed	Teaching
Sending	Sent to Galilee to Preach and Make Disciples	Sent to Israel then to the Nations	Sending

The next three sections will compare and contrast the discipling of Jesus, the Twelve and the Nations.

The Discipling of Jesus

In the gospel of Matthew there are several distinct stories and teachings about the invitation Jesus extended for people to follow Him. In 4:18-22, Jesus extends a call or invitation for Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Him. This invitation is later repeated to Matthew (9:9) and the rich young

ruler(19:21). While the calling of disciples by Jesus is easily recognized, Christ's own call has not been so readily seen.

But if the call to discipleship is the initial step in the making of disciples and Jesus is the first disciple, then where is the call extended to Jesus to enter into discipleship? Could it be that in the preaching of John, Jesus recognized the call to enter His own public ministry?

The focus of John's preaching is to "prepare the way of the Lord" (3:3). Many responded to His call for repentance by being baptized (3:5), including the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7-10). John predicts that a more powerful One will come after Him to baptize with the Holy Spirit and bring ultimate judgment(3:11-12).

However, not even John foresees that his preaching is a call to humble discipleship instead of a commissioning to Messianic rule. Before Jesus receives "all authority (28:18), He must take the steps of a faithful disciple Himself by leaving all in response to the call of discipleship:

Tidings of the wilderness prophet and his wonderful announcement, spread throughout Galilee. The message reached the peasants in the remotest hilltowns, and the fisher folk by the sea, and in these simple, earnest hearts found its truest response. In Nazareth it was told in the carpenter shop that had been Joseph's, and One recognized the call. (White 1898:109).

Christ's unreserved response to the call by submitting to baptism is affirmed by the heavenly commendation (3:16-17). After the baptism, Jesus is "led" (4:1) into the wilderness by the Spirit. As a faithful disciple, Jesus leaves all earthly support and follows the will of God.

By obeying God's teachings in the book of Deuteronomy (4:3-11), Jesus as the New Israel overcomes the devil and is successful in His wilderness training. He is then sent to "Galilee of the Gentiles" (4:15) to preach to the people and call His

first disciples. Jesus now attempts to reproduce His own call, training and commissioning in the disciples.

The Discipling of the Twelve

Just as Jesus was called to enter into His discipleship, He extends the call to His first disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. “Behind this command to “make disciples” (μαθητευω) there is the thought that one can become a disciple of Jesus only on the basis of a call that leads to discipleship. This is precisely how men were made disciples of Jesus in his day” (De Ridder 1975:185).

The only requirement for entering into a discipling relationship with Jesus is that they would have to leave all and follow Him. By following Jesus they would gain insight into how to be “fishers of men” (4:18). The whole object of their discipling therefore was to fit them to disciple, to catch and to train others.

The cost of discipleship is emphasized by Simon Peter and Andrew leaving their nets and James and John leaving their boat and father. Jesus teaches that to respond to the call involves letting the dead bury the dead (8:22) and a cross (10:38; 16:24). Following Jesus will involve a sacrifice of self, a surrender to the will of the Lord that has extended the call.

There is a distinction between those disciples who make Jesus Lord and others who oppose His rule. “Jesus’ opponents never address him as ‘Lord’ and the disciples never in any way other than ‘Lord’ (Bosch 1997:75). Although the disciples are not baptized by Jesus as a recognition of Christ’s call, the same self-sacrifice inherent in baptism is echoed by their willingness to leave all.

Discipleship involved acceptance of his authority, inwardly by believing in him and outwardly by obeying him. There is a supremely personal union implied everywhere in the New Testament when the word μαθητης (disciple) is used. There can be nothing in the life of

the disciple that is apart from the Lord and his life (De Ridder 1975:186).

Once the disciples have followed the call of Jesus they are instructed in the ways of discipleship and the kingdom through the words and deeds of Jesus. When Matthew responds to the call of Jesus, the Master immediately teaches both His new and more experienced disciples the importance of inclusion in the kingdom of God(9:9-13). Jesus does this by both attending a dinner with Matthew's friends and responding to the Pharisees criticism of eating with sinners.

In this and other stories in Matthew, the disciples are made a part of the narrative. Jesus is not content with a mere classroom experience but teaches His disciples as they learn lessons they are daily learning by following Jesus.

Bornkamm establishes that by the inclusion of μαθητης in 8:21,23, the entire pericope was to be considered a 'discipleship story.' and if that perspective is kept in mind, one can see that Matthew has transformed many teaching segments into explicit discipleship-teaching pericopae. In approximately seventeen of Matthew's thirty-four inclusions, the term μαθητης is a signal word to note discipleship instruction (Wilkins 1988:165).

Despite some apprehension by Peter and the disciples when Jesus mentions the cross, (16:21-23), the disciples faithfully follow Jesus as He weaves His ministry back and forth between Jerusalem and Galilee. Christ's prediction of their abandonment of Him at the cross is repudiated by Peter and the rest of the disciples (26:33-35).

Although their human weakness does prevent them from following Jesus to the cross, they do gather in Galilee as Jesus had promised (26:32) to follow Him again (28:16). Having been discipled by Jesus, they are now prepared to go and disciple the nations.

The Discipling of the Nations

In the first commissioning of the disciples in Matthew Jesus tells them to: “not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans” but “Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (10:5-6). From a pedagogical point of view, it is always best to progress from the known to the unknown. Would it be too much to conjecture that Christ first sent His disciples to their own people before facing the additional challenge of contextualizing the message to the Gentiles?

After reviewing the scope of God’s concern for the nations from the Old Testament to the pre-resurrection ministry of Jesus, Blauw states the new direction embodied in the Great Commission by saying: “For it cannot be denied that here, *and for the first time*, the commission is given to go out among the nations” (1962:86). In the gospels, the embodiment of the nations in the express will of God is not a surprise addendum at the end of the gospel but also presupposed in the following ways:

Although the disciples’ post-resurrection mission was not a major element in Jesus’ teaching prior to his death, it was an undertaking he anticipated and to which he alluded in advance. A future universalistic mission was presupposed by Jesus’ references to the gospel of the kingdom being preached ‘in the whole world’ (Matt. 24:14; 26:13; Mark 13:10; 14:9). The resurrection, however, brought that worldwide mission to the forefront (Harvey 1998a:45).

This positive turning towards the discipling of the nations comes as a result of the universal authority given to Jesus after the resurrection.

Seen in the light of Christ’s position of authority over all things (in heaven and earth) a positive attitude towards ‘all nations’ has come into being that overshadows anything negative may have been said about the nations. This positive relationship has been given character and meaning by the order ‘make them into disciples of mine’ (Blauw 1962:86).

Just as Jesus was discipled by the Father and the disciples by Jesus, the disciples are now to make disciples of the nations. They are to do this through the baptizing (calling), teaching (following) and sending others into the harvest field until the very end of time. Like themselves, the nations are now called upon to leave all and come under the Lordship of He who now has authority in all heaven and all earth.

In order to disciple the nations, “One will have to pass Israel’s boundaries consciously and intentionally to be able to fulfill the order” (Blauw 1962:86).

The going to the world must correspond to his assignment, for in his commission the disciple finds his path of obedience. ‘As the Father has sent me, so send I you’” (John20:21). Therefore, ‘make disciples of all nations’ remains the center and heart of covenant obedience. By it the disciple displays that he lives under the Lordship of Christ for the word πορευομαι carries the connotation of task or goal. Missions is the summons of the Lordship of Christ (De Ridder 1975:185).