

## Talmid : The Hebraic Roots of Discipleship

Jesus' final words in Mathew 28 : 18-20 are what we call the Great Commission – to make disciples of all nations. But what did Jesus mean by a “disciple” (Hebrew “*talmid*”)? Jesus' method of raising disciples was unique to his Jewish culture. By learning about this practice, we can have fresh insight into what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and how to fulfil his commission. There are of course historical and cultural differences between us and the time when Jesus walked this earth, but there are also timeless principles relating to discipleship that can be applied nowadays that this article aims to highlight.

Jesus lived in a deeply religious culture that highly valued biblical understanding. Rabbis were greatly respected, and to be a disciple of a famous rabbi was a great honour. Rabbis were expected not only to have a vast knowledge about the Bible, but to show through their example how to live by the scriptures. A disciple's goal was to gain the rabbi's knowledge, but even more importantly, to become like him in character. It was expected that when the disciple became mature, he would take his rabbi's teaching to the community and raise up disciples of his own.

A disciple was expected to leave his family and job to join the rabbi in his simple lifestyle. Disciples would live with the rabbi twenty-four hours a day, walking from town to town, studying the scriptures, teaching, working and eating together. The disciples were also supposed to be the rabbi's servants, submitting to his authority while they served his needs. Indeed, the word “rabbi” means “my master” and was a term of great respect.

The rabbi-disciple relationship was very close. A rabbi was considered to be like a father to his disciples. When Peter said, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Mathew 26 : 35), he was reflecting the deep love and loyalty that disciples had for their rabbi. Jesus' insistence that his disciples leave everything to follow him would not have been considered extreme in his culture.

Jesus' method of discipleship, grounded in his Hebraic culture, gives us a picture of our calling as Christians. People often focus on knowledge of the scriptures rather than living like Jesus in front of others. While it is important to know and to share the truth, Jesus' call to discipleship goes way beyond that. The apostle Paul stressed this fact for Timothy when he reminded him to watch both his life and doctrine carefully (1 Timothy 4:16). Jesus lived with disciples to show them how to be like him. They in turn were fully committed to the rabbi-disciple relationship, learning from him, submitting to his authority and taking on his character. Then they went out and made disciples, teaching and doing their best to show others by their own example. The Kingdom of God is built primarily in this way – through close relationships, sharing lives and learning together.

Through this model of discipleship, we see that Jesus isn't only interested in having our minds - he wants our hearts and lives too. Then our passion for following him becomes a loud witness for him, and inspires others to do the same.

*Adapted from “Listening to the Language of the Bible : Hearing it through Jesus' Ears”*

- L. Tverberg and B. Okkema (2006)