

# Being a Disciple of Jesus

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In the last issue, we discussed the cost of being, and the characteristic of, a disciple of Jesus. But what are the marks of a disciple? How can someone identify you as a Christian? First, love. Jesus said: **“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:35). Wow. Love! Jesus said love is a distinguishing mark for His disciples.

The ancient Greco-Roman world that the Gospel initially penetrated knew nothing of Christ’s love. The philosophies and religions of the day taught against compassion and mercy. So this idea of loving each other was revolutionary and radical. And through their writings, we know that what stood out to many of the Christians’ early observers was the love they saw among God’s people.

The second-century philosopher Aristeides wrote about the characteristics he saw of the Christians: “They seek to persuade their servants or handmaids or children to become Christians by the love they have for them. And when they have become so, they call them without distinction, ‘brothers.’ They walk in all humility and kindness and love and they love one another. When they see a stranger, they bring them to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother for they do not call brothers those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the Spirit and in God. If there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with the necessary food” (public domain).

One of the most wonderful things about traveling is meeting Christians from different cultures, backgrounds, and denominations. There’s something special that happens when you meet another child of God. You know how you can meet someone and, because of the commonality of faith in Jesus, you can feel like you’ve known them for 20 years? There’s this wonderful bond that takes place—that’s the love in the family of God. It’s a beautiful thing.

Are we loving our brothers and sisters? Are we loving the people that we’re congregating with and God’s people outside our own congregation? We make a mistake when we are unnecessarily critical of other Christians because of differences of opinion about things that aren’t of utmost importance. We have to be careful. Love is the first distinguishing mark of a disciple.

Second, Jesus said that fruit would be a distinguishing mark of the believer. **“By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples”** (John 15:8). What is Jesus talking about when He speaks of bearing fruit? We frequently think of bearing fruit in terms of how many people we share the Gospel with or lead to the Lord. I don’t think that’s primarily what Jesus was getting at.

Remember the context—He had just said, **“I am the vine, you are the branches”** (John 15:5a). So fruit is primarily Christ-likeness. That’s the fruit the Father is looking for from the lives of His people. Jesus also said, **“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher”** (Luke 6:40). So Jesus’ disciples will be marked by love and likeness to Christ, which shows itself quite frequently in good works. Jesus **“went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil”** (Acts 10:38b). So Christians ought to be a people out beyond our own borders, doing good to others. That’s the fruit. Jesus said, *This is how My Father will be glorified, that you bear much fruit* (paraphrase of John 15:8). And in the church’s early days, it was this Christ-likeness in the Christian community that impacted people.

Rodney Stark, a professor at Baylor University, wrote, “Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with the many urgent problems. To cities filled with the

homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for

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attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fire, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services. ... For what they brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable” (Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996).

It was that fruit—the love and the good works combined together—that impacted people. Over the past few years, as we’ve experienced hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes around the world, Christians have mobilized and gone into these devastated places with love and good works. This sends a tremendous message into these communities. People are finding that it’s the Christians who have been there all along and are continuing when the government has long since pulled out.

Disciples of Jesus do; they show Christ’s love through the good works that are connected back to Christ-likeness. In the next issue, we’ll conclude our series on discipleship by examining the purpose and rewards of being a disciple of Jesus. ☞