

Talmidim

The Disciples as Talmidim

The decision to follow a rabbi as a *talmid* meant total commitment in the first century as it does today. Since a *talmid* was totally devoted to becoming like the rabbi he would have spent his entire time listening and observing the teacher to know how to understand the Scripture and how to put it into practice. Jesus describes his relationship to his disciples in exactly this way ([Matt. 10:24-25](#); [Luke 6:40](#)) He chose them to be with him ([Mark 3:13-19](#)) so they could be like him ([John 13:15](#)).

Most students sought out the rabbis they wished to follow. This happened to Jesus on occasion ([Mark 5:19](#); [Luke 9:57](#)). There were a few exceptional rabbis who were famous for seeking out their own students. If a student wanted to study with a rabbi he would ask if he might "follow" the rabbi. The rabbi would consider the student's potential to become like him and whether he would make the commitment necessary. It is likely most students were turned away. Some of course were invited to "follow me". This indicated the rabbi believed the potential *talmid* had the ability and commitment to become like him. It would be a remarkable affirmation of the confidence the teacher had in the student. In that light, consider whether the disciples of Jesus were talmidim as understood by the people of his time. They were to be "with" him [Mark 3:13-19](#); to follow him [Mark 1:16-20](#); to live by his teaching [John 8:31](#); were to imitate his actions [John 13:13-15](#); were to make everything else secondary to their learning from the rabbi [Luke 14:26](#).

This may explain Peter's walking on water ([Matt. 14:22-33](#)). When Jesus (the rabbi) walked on water, Peter (the *talmid*) wanted to be like him. Certainly Peter had not walked on water before nor could he have imagined being able to do it. However, if the teacher, who chose me because he believed I could be like him, can do it so must I. And he did! It was a miracle but he was just like the rabbi! And then...he doubted. Doubted what? Traditionally we have seen he doubted Jesus' power. Maybe, but Jesus was still standing on the water. I believe Peter doubted himself, or maybe better his capacity to be empowered by Jesus. Jesus' response "why did you doubt" (14:31) then means "why did you doubt I could empower you to be like me?"

That is a crucial message for the *talmid* of today. We must believe that Jesus calls us to be disciples because he knows he can so instruct, empower, and fill us with his Spirit that we can be like him (at least in our actions). We must believe in ourselves! Otherwise we will doubt that he can use us and as a result we will not be like him.

Being like the rabbi is the major focus of the life of talmidim. They listen and question, they respond when questioned, they follow without knowing where the rabbi is taking them knowing that the rabbi has good reason for bringing them to the right place for his teaching to make the most sense. In the story recorded in [Matthew 16](#), Jesus walked nearly thirty miles one way to be in Caesarea Philippi for a lesson that fit the location perfectly. Surely he talked with them along the way but the whole trip seems to have been geared for one lesson that takes less than ten minutes to give ([Matt. 16:13-28](#)).

This means that the present day *talmid* (disciple) must be no less focused on the rabbi. We must be with him in his Word, we must follow him even if we are not sure of the final destination, we must live by his teaching (which means we must know those teachings well), and we must imitate him whenever we can. In other words everything becomes secondary in life to being like him. When they had observed and learned for a time they were sent out to begin to practice being like the teacher ([Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-24](#)). The amazement of the *talmidim* in discovering they could be like their teacher is delightful ([10:17](#)). It is very understandable to anyone who has seen the deep attachment of *talmidim* to his or her rabbi even today. It is most affirming when a student discovers that being like the teacher is possible. The teachers joy is no less as he discovers his students have learned well and are gifted and empowered by God to act as the rabbi does ([Luke 10:21](#); see also [John 17:16, 18](#)).

When the teacher believed that his *talmidim* were prepared to be like him he would commission them to become disciple makers. He was saying, as far as is possible you are like me. Now go and seek others who will imitate you. Because you are like me, when they imitate you they will be like me. This practice certainly lies behind Jesus great commission ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)). While in one sense no one can be like Jesus in his divine nature, or in his perfect human nature, when taught by the Rabbi, empowered and blessed by the Spirit of God, imitating Jesus becomes a possibility. The mission of the disciples was to seek others who would imitate them and therefore become like Jesus. That strategy, blessed by God's Spirit would bear amazing fruit especially in the Gentile world.

It also helps to understand the teaching of Paul who sought to make disciples. He invited Herod Agrippa and the Roman governor to become like him ([Acts 26:28-29](#)). He taught the young churches to imitate him and others who were like Jesus ([1 Cor. 4:15-16, 11:1](#); [1 Thess. 1:6-7, 2:14](#); [2 Thess. 3:7-9](#); [1 Tim. 4:12](#)). The writer to the Hebrews had the same mission ([Heb. 6:12, 13:7](#)).

This is one of the most significant concepts of the New Testament. Jesus, the divine Messiah, chose the rabbi-*talmid* system. He taught like a rabbi in real life situations, using the most brilliant methods ever devised. He interpreted God's word and completed it. He demonstrated obedience to it. He chose disciples whom he would empower to become like him and led them around until they began to imitate him. Then (after the gift of the Holy Spirit) he sent them out to make disciples...to lead people to imitate them by obeying Jesus. And that strategy, by God's blessing would change the most pagan of cultures.

That is our call too! Jesus calls us to be his *talmidim*. We must know God's Word and Jesus' interpretation of it. We must be passionate in our devotion to that word and Jesus example. As we are filled with his Spirit, we must be obsessed with being like him as far as is humanly possible. We must strive for relationships with others so they will observe us and seek to imitate our love and devotion to God and our Jesus-like lifestyle ([1 Cor. 2:16, 11:1](#); [Gal. 3:27](#)). By God's grace, that strategy CAN change the most pagan of cultures.... our own!

