

# discipleship essentials

## Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Study Guide

### EXPLORING DISCIPLESHIP LESSON 8: THE DISCIPLESHIP CYCLE

#### INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Exploring Discipleship. This series of lessons studies the spiritual formation of a follower of Jesus Christ – the process referred to as discipleship. The discipleship process occurs after someone comes to faith in Jesus Christ, beginning with a desire to live out God’s plan for their life. When we undertake the task of helping a new believer to grow in their faith, we are said to disciple them. This material will benefit anyone wanting to disciple others, especially those who are practising evangelism, following up with new believers and helping them grow in their faith. Discipleship is the duty of every believer, especially those in spiritual leadership!

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on [www.discipleshipessentials.org](http://www.discipleshipessentials.org).



# EXPLORING DISCIPLESHIP

## LESSON 8: THE DISCIPLESHIP CYCLE

### WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

The purpose of this lesson is to understand discipleship as a cycle, with the end goal of making new disciples.

### JUST SO YOU KNOW...

Through our Christian walk we will always need the help of others. Each of us has something to learn from others, and each of us has valuable experiences that should be shared. Discipleship (or growing in our Christlikeness) will never be fully realized on earth. In this lesson we will look at the discipleship cycle which is completed when the disciple can mentor others and pass knowledge on to them. This cycle can also be used for other forms of discipleship, such as an experienced pastor training a younger pastor (who will someday mentor other pastors). Sometimes we use the phrase 'spiritual multiplication'. Where spiritual addition would only add one or two new believers, spiritual multiplication happens when those we disciple over our lifetime are trained to disciple many more!

## GETTING STARTED

1. What goes into preparing soil for planting vegetables or flowers? What does a plant need to thrive? What happens if the plant does not receive these things?

2. What was necessary for you to learn and experience before you could lead others to Jesus Christ?



## STUDY

- ❖ **REPRODUCING:** One of the main objectives in discipleship is to train each disciple to be a discipler and thereby reproduce himself. We refer to this as the Discipleship Cycle.

- Read 2 Timothy 2:2. What did the Apostle Paul tell his disciple Timothy? What is the end goal of discipleship?

Just as a farmer prepares the soil, plants the seeds and cares for a young plant until it is mature enough to produce fruit, a discipler should keep the end goal in sight: a mature Christian who is able to plant seed in the lives of other people.

- ❖ **SOWING SEEDS:** Jesus knew the importance of nurturing young faith and giving it all the necessary elements for growth. The disciple must be the “right soil” in order for their faith to grow and spread to others.

- Read Matthew 13:1-9. What do you think this parable is about? Write it down in your own words.

- Jesus’ own explanation of the parable is given to us in Matthew 13:18-23. How can this passage help you understand the nature of discipleship? How is a seed being planted like the proclamation of the Gospel?

If the good news of Jesus is the seed, it is clear from this passage that not everyone who receives the seed will grow in their faith and be capable of producing a harvest (or spreading their faith to produce new believers).

- ❖ **DISCIPLESHIP IS A CYCLE:** In the discipleship cycle, you will be teaching people at various stages. This gardening metaphor can help us think about your disciples’ responses to your teaching. In the parable, the seed being sown is the Word of God. The four different soils represent four different categories of receptivity and growth. People you disciple may be in one of these



categories or may progress through all of them. The goal is always to help them become 'good soil disciples'.

- **Hard Soil Disciples:** The Gospel message, 'the seed', which has the potential to grow to true faith, does not take root. This soil needs to be cultivated through prayer and patience.
  - **Rocky Soil Disciples:** This soil is like a new Christian who might have responded to the Gospel joyfully, but superficially, and is weak on follow-through. They are vulnerable to giving up because of trouble or persecution.
  - **Contaminated Soil Disciples:** Sometimes soil can be full of thorns and weeds that choke out the good growing plants. A Christian, once growing in their faith, may begin to let the deceitfulness, cares and riches of the world choke out their faith as it competes for their devotion. This can be the most challenging person to disciple. Some may even fall away from their faith.
  - **Good Soil Disciples:** Good soil nurtures good plants that grow to produce a good harvest. The harvest for a Christian is not only the fruit of the Spirit, but also reproducing themselves by bringing others to faith in Jesus Christ and discipling them. This is the goal of discipleship. From here, the cycle begins again as God's Word is proclaimed to others. As the 'seed' falls to the ground and takes root, new disciples produce new disciples.
- What type of soil were you when you first heard the Gospel?

- Do you know anyone who falls into the above categories?

- The illustration of plants maturing until harvest is seen in several other places in the Bible. Read the following and write down what is mentioned about planting, caring for plants and harvesting.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9	
John 4:35-38	
Matthew 9:37-38	



- ❖ **THE DISCIPLESHIP CYCLE:** Just as plants have a life cycle, so do believers in Jesus. Here we will look at the different stages of the discipleship cycle. Some of these stages will overlap somewhat, but you can use this chart to effectively guide your new disciple. This chart lists what a disciple will learn or practise and the resources you can use to help them.

Stage	Activity	Leads to...
1. Pre-Evangelism	Preparing the Soil	When the soil is prepared, it can more readily accept the seed.
2. Evangelism	Planting Seeds	When the seed is planted in soil, it can begin to take root.
3. Christian Foundations	Taking Root	When the seed germinates, it can begin to push through the soil.
4. Growth and Service	Growing to Maturity	When the plant grows, it can produce leaves and blossoms.
5. Spiritual Leadership	Producing Fruit	When fruit is produced, it contains seed that can begin the cycle all over again. The goal is multiplication.

- In the chart that follows, read the information about each stage carefully, and then write down in the blank column some practical steps you could take to help someone in this stage, or some other resources you could use to help them (for instance, books you have read, tracts or pamphlets, in addition to the *Discipleship Essentials* material listed).



# THE STAGES OF THE DISCIPLESHIP CYCLE

<p><b>1. PRE EVANGELISM:</b> A person must be ready to hear the Gospel in order for it to be well received. We must meet people where they are, and begin with what they already understand. Sometimes a relationship is necessary to demonstrate the Gospel. Sometimes we must meet a person's physical needs before they are ready to think about their spiritual needs.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help them have a positive attitude towards Christianity by showing love in action.</li> <li>• Help them have a positive attitude toward the Bible by showing its relevance to their life.</li> <li>• Help them see the need for a Saviour by sharing your testimony, and letting them see your changed life.</li> <li>• Help them learn about the person and work of Jesus Christ so they are ready to put their faith in Him.</li> <li>• This may include casual conversation, acts of service or meeting of physical needs, formal debates, spiritual surveys, literature distribution, concerts, special classes etc.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>2. EVANGELISM:</b> When a person understands who Jesus is and why He came, we can present the Gospel to them and show them their need for a Saviour. The act of evangelism can take many forms, and many different tools can be used. Some people will need to hear the Gospel multiple times before they are ready to receive it and respond to it.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help them understand who Jesus is and why He came.</li> <li>• Help them to see their sin and their need for a Saviour. Tell them how your life has been changed.</li> <li>• Present the Good News of salvation available in Jesus Christ and offer them the opportunity to respond with a prayer of faith.</li> <li>• Follow up with their decision by explaining the new life they have in Christ, and the power available to them from the Holy Spirit.</li> <li>• Evangelism can take place one-on-one or through large group evangelism, events, or Bible studies.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>3. CHRISTIAN FOUNDATIONS:</b> New Christians will need an understanding of what the Bible teaches. They must understand their salvation and the implications of it, as well as how living as a Christian differs from their old way of life.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help them understand what the Christian life is all about. They may spend time with you or others in fellowship and study of the Bible.</li> <li>• The practices of baptism and communion as well as church membership (where appropriate) can be explained at this stage.</li> <li>• They should begin habits of daily prayer, Bible reading and group Bible study, as well as worship with other believers if possible.</li> <li>• Help them deal with matters of sin by exposing them to the Word of God, allowing the Holy Spirit to convict them.</li> <li>• Teach them to rely on God's Word and the Holy Spirit.</li> <li>• Answer questions they have on the Christian faith, or seek out answers together.</li> <li>• A disciple should be taught the foundation of Biblical truth in some systematic way.</li> </ul>	



<p><b>4. GROWTH AND SERVICE:</b></p> <p>The life of a Christian is centered on Jesus Christ. A believer who is growing in their faith will make choices that put God’s desires before their own. This stage can be difficult and take a long time. It is impossible for this to occur without the help of the Holy Spirit, so the new Christian must learn to lean on God and be faithful in prayer. At this stage, they should begin to serve others and undertake specific efforts towards evangelism. This is Christian ministry. Training in evangelism may occur at the earlier stages, but they may now be ready to grasp new opportunities, plan a personal ministry and undertake planned evangelism.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gently show them areas of their life where they need to put Jesus first (such as finances, time, attitude).</li> <li>• Help them see the need for healthy relationships, sexual purity, and personal integrity.</li> <li>• Introduce them to other Christians who are walking with God so they see many examples of Christ-centered living.</li> <li>• The goal is consistent Christian living, and a reliance on God rather than self.</li> <li>• Help the disciple discover their spiritual gifts. Model serving God and others, and set up opportunities to serve together.</li> <li>• Take opportunities to share the Gospel with others together.</li> <li>• Encourage the disciple towards goals of serving others, sharing the Gospel and getting involved in a ministry.</li> <li>• Help them understand the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism, and prepare them for spiritual opposition by studying spiritual warfare together.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>5. SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP:</b></p> <p>At this stage, the disciple is reproducing new believers. They are leading others to Jesus, training or teaching others, but still require discipleship in order to lead effectively. Most Christians will not end up pastoring a church or leading a spiritual movement – but every Christian can lead in small but significant ways. Leadership of family, prayer groups, or Bible studies are great starting places. The goal is multiplication – not simply addition of new believers.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a disciple grows in their ability to minister and serve, they will grow in their capacity for leadership.</li> <li>• Encourage your disciple to teach and disciple others, possibly by taking leadership of a group.</li> <li>• Effective leadership requires Godly character and a desire to serve rather than wield power. Help the disciple develop skills they need to lead more effectively (such as communication, decision making).</li> <li>• Help them see weaknesses in their leadership and rely on God to strengthen them. Pray with them.</li> <li>• Help them give good leadership and training to others so that more fruit is produced.</li> <li>• Keep them accountable to a high standard of Christian living.</li> </ul>	

❖ **A NEVER ENDING CYCLE:** Since Jesus trained His Apostles, disciples have been teaching new disciples! This process of following someone’s example is what strengthens us all in our faith.

➤ **Starting Again:** When you share the Gospel with someone and they accept Jesus as their Saviour, the cycle starts again. It is not necessary to have completed all five stages – in fact evangelism (sharing the Gospel with others) should begin in stage three or four!



- **Leading the Way:** The person who is discipling should be at a more advanced stage spiritually than the person he or she discipled. To be one or two stages ahead is ideal, though not necessary in the later stages.
- **A Life-Long Process:** While one person may move through the first few stages in a year or less, it may take someone else several years before they accept the Gospel. Each of us moves at a different rate. Some people will never attain level five. This is not a formal scale, but merely a guide to illustrate how discipleship works. The process of discipleship does not end; we will always need to become more like Jesus Christ while learning to serve Him. Knowing that producing new disciples is a life-long process will help us to not be discouraged!
- Read [Philippians 3](#). How does the Apostle Paul describe life-long discipleship?

## IN SUMMARY

- ❖ One of the main objectives in discipleship is to train each disciple to be a discipler and thereby reproduce himself. We refer to this as the Discipleship Cycle.
- ❖ Just as a farmer prepares the soil, plants the seeds and cares for a young plant until it is mature enough to produce fruit, a discipler should keep the end goal in sight: a mature Christian who is able to plant seed in the lives of other people.
- ❖ In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes how different people receive the Word of God – sometimes the Word will take root, and sometimes it will not.
- ❖ We refer to five stages of the discipleship cycle:
  - Pre-Evangelism, which is preparing the soil
  - Evangelism, which is the planting of a seed
  - Christian Foundations, which is the seed taking root
  - Growth and Service, which is the maturing of the plant
  - Spiritual Leadership, which is the producing of fruit and harvesting of the plant
- ❖ Discipleship is a never ending cycle; it is a life-long process.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stage of the discipleship cycle are you at?

2. What can you do to advance in your discipleship? According to the framework we have looked at today, what do you need to learn next? What do you need to practise? Who can you find to help you?

3. What are some of the things that contribute to Christian growth? What has helped you to grow?

4. What other resources are available to you in your discipleship of others, as well as your personal development as a Christian?