

MAKE DISCIPLES

Surprised to see an empty seat at the Super Bowl stadium, a diehard fan remarked about it to a woman sitting nearby. "It was my husband's," the woman explained, "But he passed away."

"I'm very sorry," said the man. "Yet I'm really surprised that another relative, or friend, didn't jump at the chance to take the seat reserved for him." "Beats me," she said. "They all insisted on going to the funeral."

Sometimes you just have to get your priorities straight!

A person's last words and last wishes are not something to be taken lightly - they're to be treasured and honored.

As we continue on in our series on the BASICS of the Christian journey, we're going to spend some time reflecting on one of the last great commands of Jesus before He ascended - a teaching we often refer to as the Great Commission.

Join me in Matthew 28, verse 18...

READING

Matthew 28:¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Let's pray.

After a distinguished performing career, a virtuoso violinist named Jascha Heifetz accepted an appointment as professor of music at UCLA.

Asked what had prompted his change of career, Heifetz replied: "Violin playing is a perishable art. It must be passed on as a personal skill; otherwise it is lost."

We need to listen to this great musician. Living the Christian life is a highly personal experience.

We can't pull it off merely by watching skilled veterans "perform." We need hands-on instruction for faith to become truly alive.

That's what we mean when we talk about discipleship. It's not just Sunday School or Bible Studies - it's teaching others the art of following Jesus.

Discipleship is the intentional, concerted effort to persuade and educate someone else into a different way of thinking and living.

- When you go to college - you're not just getting a degree - you're learning HOW to think.
- When you go to a trade school - you're not just gaining a skill - you're learning a philosophy and art for that work.
- When you choose to follow Jesus - you're not just hedging your bets about what happens after you die - you're learning a whole new way of living in the world.

Personally, I have a robust hope in God's power through the Church. Jesus gave US the task to continue the work of making disciples. But we have to acknowledge that there are lives at stake.

Following Jesus IS a perishable art. If we FAIL at discipleship, there will be dramatic consequences for our world.

One of the most depressing passages of scripture to me is found in Judges chapter 2, starting in verse 8. Joshua had led the Israelites into the Promised Land and they finally found rest.

Judges 2:⁸ Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

¹⁰ After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

An entire generation who did not know the Lord nor the great miracles He'd done for them...how is that possible?

The Hebrew verb *yada*, "to know", can be understood in two general senses:

1. to have an *awareness* or *understanding* of a given subject, or
2. to be *acquainted with* or have *intimate connection* and experience with a given person.

And really both of these senses are at play here - the generation before these Israelites failed both to teach their children about God, but also failed to teach them to how to love God and live in covenant relationship with Him.

This is why one of Jesus' last and most important commands to His followers is to say, "make sure you pass this on." Don't just do it yourself - teach others how to follow me too!

Given all that, this morning I'd like to walk us through the WHY, the HOW, and the WHAT of discipleship.

Why do we disciple. How do we disciple. And What specifically does it look like?

So let's start with the WHY.

I. WE MAKE DISCIPLES BECAUSE JESUS IS WORTH IT (18).

I used to think it seemed like a strange non-sequitur for Jesus: I've been given all authority - so you all should go and make disciples.

I think this is deeper than Jesus just exercising some newfound authority. He's had this authority all along and he could have commanded them to do this at any point.

But it's different now, because of what has just happened.

Just a few days prior, the whole world, including Jesus' followers, would have concluded that Jesus had inherited the exact opposite of authority. He'd been condemned to death on a cross.

He'd come face-to-face with the authorities of the world, and He'd lost. At least they thought.

But in His resurrection, Jesus proved that what they thought was humiliating defeat was only the prelude to victory and glory.

THIS is why we make disciples.

It says "Therefore" - because Jesus has all authority and has been glorified, his followers have a motivation to let others know the good news.

Any other way of life is meaningless in comparison to the surpassing glory of Jesus. Have you been convinced and compelled by His lordship? Then share that joy with others.

We make disciples because it's worth obeying His commands to give Him glory AND because we believe that more people following Jesus is the best way to make our world a better place.

So if Jesus' worth and glory is the starting point, what is the goal? Let me take a quick side-note and talk about the tension that sometimes exists between evangelism and discipleship.

Sometimes in the church you'll have people struggling over whether we should spend more time going out to share the Gospel with others or more time focusing on training up believers in the church.

The answer is 'YES'. It's both.

Teaching and spiritual formation is just one part of the journey. And Evangelism is another point along the way.

What we actually see with discipleship is that there's a continuum - a journey from no knowledge of Jesus on one end to fully mature Christlikeness on the other.

And there's ALL SORTS of stuff in between.

- Hear about Jesus for the first time [probably several times before it takes root]
- Make a conscious decision that you want to accept Jesus as Lord and follow Him.
- Make that decision public by committing to a church.
- Learn the basics, get scripture in your head and heart.
- Serve out of your gifts, discern what it means to be YOU in God's kingdom.
- Learn to wrestle through tough questions and journey through doubt while clinging to God's goodness.

Fully mature Christians walk in the power of the Spirit even as they walk with a limp.

I'm not going to completely unpack that, because this is just discipleship 101, but I'll give you 2 pictures just to cast that vision for you real quick.

One is a OT story I've talked about before - actually the passage I preached on my first Sunday here - that's a man named Jacob who had a strange encounter wrestling with the Lord at night.

Jacob had been following God's call most all his life, but he had baggage he was still working through. And on this particular night he was anxious because he was on his way to meet up with his brother who he'd cheated out of his inheritance years ago. In the midst of that anxiety, an angel of the Lord shows up and has a wrestling match with Jacob to give him a tangible picture of struggle and blessing on the other side. In a sense, Jacob learns that God will always be with him, no matter the struggle.

As Jacob walks away from that night, it says that he walked with a limp the rest of his life. That limp is a mark that he's been through something, and he's different as a result.

The second picture is Jesus on the cross - that even as Jesus is God himself in human form, he cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Lord of the universe, while He's demonstrating the full extent of His love for us, also demonstrates the powerful relationship between faith and doubt.

A fully mature Christian is not a Christian who doesn't doubt - it's a believer who journeys through the valley of the shadow of death, and yet does not fear because they hold on to the faith and the hope that God is good and God is with them.

THAT's the goal. THAT's the endgame.

To live a radical life of obedience because Jesus is worth it.

Discipleship is a journey, and there's no exact set path. It's just getting from one end to the other - and the next step really depends on where you've been before.

So if that's the goal, how do we get people there?

HOW do we go about making these disciples? First:

II. WE MAKE DISCIPLES BY WELCOMING INTO A NEW FAMILY (19b).

The first step of Jesus' command here is to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is a crucial part of discipleship because it is THE sign that Christ has given us to officially say "I do" as part of this family. There's nothing magical about the waters of baptism. The water isn't somehow holier than normal water.

And we don't necessarily need to split hairs about whether you're dunking, sprinkling, pouring, going 3 times forward or 1 time backwards - I'll talk more about that in a sec.

None of that ULTIMATELY matters.

It's the community that you're being welcomed into that matters. It's the entrance into a family that is committed to and shaped by the person of Jesus Christ. THAT'S IT.

It's kinda like a wedding. It's the 'I do's' of our walk with Jesus.

Baptism is the formal act of celebration and welcoming when someone makes the conscious decision to join this family.

With that said, much like a marriage ceremony, there is profound meaning in the act and the declaration here that set the stage for the life together that's to come.

When we read the scriptures and look at the teaching of the early church, we're given a model for how we ought to baptize that is rich with symbolism:

- Whenever possible, we're taught that we ought to baptize in running water - like a river - as a symbol of cleansing.
- We're also taught that we ought to be completely submerged, giving up the entirety of ourselves.
- The ideal practice is 3 times forward: 3 times in the same water as a symbol of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and forward as a symbol of Christ's willing sacrifice unto death when his head bowed forward.

Other Christian groups will sometimes do it differently - either out of practical necessity or some other meaningful symbol. We choose to do our best to follow the example of Christ as closely as possible.

However we choose to do it, it's important that we recognize how this act sets the stage for everything that comes after it.

This leads us finally to the WHAT of Discipleship: Living Life with Christ.

III. WE MAKE DISCIPLES BY LEADING AS WE FOLLOW (20).

Jesus says that after we have baptized new believers, we are to teach them how to obey everything that He has commanded.

That's important wording - Discipleship isn't just teaching the commands. It's teaching HOW to live them out.

This involves more than just teaching facts about the Bible. To truly make disciples, you have to teach in such a way that others actually learn how to live out and apply Jesus' commands in their life.

In your bulletins this morning, you should have also received an insert with a sort of bluish green sheet that says, "The Commands of Jesus." This is a sort of summarized and condensed form of all the commands that Jesus gave throughout the Gospels. Jesus gave a ton of commands that are recorded in the 4 gospels, and some of them repeat. This may have missed a few, but I think it's a pretty helpful resource.

You could memorize this list, and it would do nothing but give you a memorized list of things you should do.

If you don't meditate upon, understand, internalize, and live out these commands, then they will be nothing more than words on a page.

But if you DO live them out, you'll discover life change. AND you'll also begin to learn that some of these commands are easier for some than they are for others. And some of them are easier in some situations than they are for others.

As you learn and grow and apply them, you'll learn tips that you can pass on to others. Real life tips to help people live these out.

In the Brethren Church, we like to talk about discipleship using the language of apprenticeship. When you become an apprentice, you spend all your time around the master craftsman so you can learn to do what they do.

There's generally a 4-step principle here as you disciple someone else:

1. I do, you watch.
2. I do, you help.
3. You do, I help.
4. You do, I watch.

The BEST teachers in this regard find ways to invite you into the process to give you hands-on experience without making you feel dumb in the process.

I have a friend named Cameron, he was actually an old roommate of mine, who is a perfect example of this when it comes to working on cars. Before I met Cameron, I was always self-conscious when it came to working on my car. I didn't even know where to start - and it always felt like when I went to ask someone for help, they'd end up making me feel like an idiot in the process.

Not Cameron. Cameron just loves cars, and he loves teaching people about them. He'd let me watch him work on his car, and explain what he was doing in his easy manner. And before long he'd be inviting me to help him out. And if I couldn't figure it out, he'd either show me how or at least show me how to find the answer.

That's the best way I can describe discipleship - you're trying to help people do what you do.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way, "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ."

"Follow me as I follow Jesus."

There's 3 people you should have in your life at all times - a mentor, a friend, and a mentee.

You should always be looking for someone ahead of you that you can learn from, someone beside you to encourage and challenge you, and someone a little further back on their journey who you can pour into as well.

It doesn't have to be complicated. It can be as formal or as informal as you like. What's important is that you are intentional about it.

CONCLUSION

A pastor named Shane Hipps once described a botched attempt he had at sharing his faith with someone. The guy he was talking to just kept railing against hypocritical and arrogant Christians that he'd known in the past. And as he talked, Shane realized that he'd acted in some similar ways more than once in his life.

He felt like he was floundering a bit, so he tried to rescue Jesus and the gospel by saying something like, "If you want to know what Christianity is really about, don't look at Christians. We're messed up just like everybody else. Instead, look to the Bible and Jesus."

The problem is, that's not what Jesus asked us to do.

If Jesus had wanted to give us a book that could tell us how we ought to live, he would have spent the entirety of his time among us here on earth holed up in a room writing down everything we needed to know.

But he didn't. Jesus actually didn't write anything down - at least not anything we have in our Bible.

Jesus spent all his time and energy investing into his disciples while he did ministry, so that when the time came, they could turn around and do the same.

God's preferred medium to communicate His Gospel to the world...is us.

The way we live our lives, the way we speak and act, the way we show others to live. It matters.

That's a notion that is both terrifying and encouraging.

Terrifying because it means that we could mess this up profoundly.

And encouraging because it means that Jesus actually believes we can do it.

Do you?