

Intentionality and Discipleship
Jeremiah 6:16, Matthew 11:28-30

Next week we're beginning a five-week sermon series on "work" - looking at "work" (the main thing you do each week whether you get paid for it or not) through the grid of Scripture. Next week we will consider work in light of the Drama of Scripture (creation, fall, redemption, restoration). Today I want us to think about discipleship - living as followers of Jesus.

In his book *The Great Omission* Dallas Willard gives an illustration that gets us into our discussion this morning. Let's say you have a neighbor who is very disappointed with his car; it never performs the way he'd like. When you hear about all of its troubles, you might conclude that his car is a "lemon," that it is inherently flawed. But then you find out that once a month he was supplementing his gasoline with a quart of water. Now you no longer blame the car or the auto maker for the car's performance. Your neighbor is disappointed because he doesn't understand how his car was designed.

In a similar way many Christians (and many who are thinking about becoming Christians) are disappointed in their walk with Christ. Some even conclude, "I must be a lemon; I am inherently flawed. The Christian life just doesn't work for me." But it may be that such persons are operating their lives in a way that is incompatible with God's design for us. Specifically, they may not understand what God promises and what God expects of us. . . what God is responsible for and what we are responsible for.

*Today's Big Idea: **God's offer of discipleship (and rest) requires intentionality.***

In today's passages we are going to see that rest is the byproduct of discipleship; God promises rest to people who are actually following Him. He promises very little to people who are lukewarm and passive. He promises rest to His disciples. And He makes clear that discipleship requires intentionality. We are going to see this in two primary Scriptures; one will probably be very familiar, and the other probably not so much. In both Scriptures, we'll notice how intentional God and Jesus expect us to be.

God's offer to rebellious people (Jeremiah 6:16)

Jeremiah was given a very difficult assignment by God. God didn't say, "Hey Jeremiah, let me float an idea by you and you tell me what you think. . ." No, when Jeremiah was about 20 years old God told him, "I have appointed you as a prophet." Jeremiah would have messages for the Jewish nation as well as for the surrounding nations.

One of the things he would be telling Judah's kings and priests was that they should not resist the invading Babylonians because God had irrevocably decided to send them into exile. Because of this message Jeremiah would be considered a traitor. He would therefore be put in stocks in the public square, he would be beaten, he would be thrown into a cistern where he sank down into the mud. Because of the hardships he would endure as a prophet, God forbid him from marrying and having children (16:2). Jeremiah was given a difficult assignment.

It's significant to note that even though God's judgment on the nation was a certainty, individuals were invited to repent and turn back to their God. One such offer is found in Jeremiah 6:16. In this verse God lays out a scenario that paints a picture for us today. The Lord, the God of Israel, tells His people to go stand at an intersection of paths or roads. As you hear this, don't think of paved highways; think of dirt roads or paths because people would be walking, not driving, on these paths.

16 Thus says the Lord,
"Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths,
Where the good way is, and walk in it;
And you will find rest for your souls.
But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'

They were supposed to go stand at this intersection and "see" and "ask" about which paths to take. They were to look and inquire about one specific set of paths to take. They are to ask and look for **the ancient paths** - those paths which the people of God had been taking for generations and centuries. The ancient paths were the time-tested paths that Abraham, Moses, and David had walked. We see here in verse 16 that these paths are also called "the good way" (as opposed to the evil or wicked way). The ancient paths are the basic way of living described in the Torah, the Law. At its core, the ancient paths involve loving God with all your heart, soul, and might. . . and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Once they found the "good way," they were supposed to walk in it. This wasn't merely an academic exercise; they were responsible to walk down the ancient paths.

Notice the promise God made to those who actually walked down the ancient paths: *You will find rest for your souls*. Biblically speaking, "rest for your souls" is the byproduct of following God. Rest is not inactivity; rest is completion. Rest is almost synonymous with *shalom* (wholeness); if you have rest you are not in perpetual turmoil; it is well with your soul.

Sadly, even though this was an honest offer, God knew that the people would refuse: *"But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'* They were saying "Thanks but no thanks" not only to God **but also to rest**. Because they refused to walk down the ancient paths, instead of rest they would experience turmoil and frustration and exhaustion.

I want us to see very clearly the intentionality God expected of the Jewish nation and that God expects of us. He expects us to seek and find; he expects us to be curious about what He wants for our lives; he expects us to respond with whole-hearted obedience. The verbs in this sentence tell the story: stand, see, ask, walk. Since these are commands, we need to believe that God gives us the grace to obey them - not independent of Him or independent of other believers. . . but by His grace and by His Spirit.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is passive; 10 means you're curious, you invest time and energy seeking God, etc.), how would you rate yourself re: intentionality? Discipleship requires intentionality.

Next, let's consider the passage in which Jesus quotes Jeremiah 6:16.

Jesus' offer to weary people (Matthew 11:28-30)

Matthew 11 describes how Jesus went to various cities in Israel, teaching and preaching, performing miracles and casting out demons. A few people believed and became disciples, but most rejected Jesus even though He did many miracles in their towns. Jesus made the memorable statement that if the miracles done in Capernaum had been done in Sodom, that city "would have remained to this day"; they would have repented, but not the people in Jesus' day.

In verses 25 through 27 Jesus prays a prayer reflecting the truth that the humble are those who follow Him and who truly understand who God is. Consider verse 25:

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

Instead of saying, "Some people accepted the Kingdom and others rejected it," Jesus expresses the response of people in terms of what God did or didn't do. He said to His heavenly Father, "**You have hidden** these things from the wise and intelligent and **have revealed** them to infants." Interestingly, Jesus doesn't imply that God was being arbitrary in His hiding or revealing. God responded to their heart attitudes: He hid the truth from the "wise and intelligent" (the proud); He revealed the truth to "infants" (the humble, those with a childlike faith). The contrast is not between smart people and dumb people or between old people and young people. The contrast is between those who are proud and self-sufficient and those who are humble and teachable. (See 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.)

The reality that ***Jesus reveals the Father to the humble and teachable*** prepares us to hear His offer of rest for the weary.

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

Jesus invites the weary and heavy-laden to come directly to Him. Many different things can be wearying burdens: unresolved conflicts, sinful habits, the busyness of life, uncertainty about the future, etc. But there's another type of burden that is quite common. The gospel of Matthew stresses how the Pharisees weighed people down with their religious/spiritual regulations. In Matthew 23:4, for example, we read:

4 "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.

Walking humbly with God had become an exhausting system of do's and don'ts. That certainly wasn't God's design in the old covenant, but that's what it had become in the first century. In our day, Christianity can become something similar. Instead of a joyful, life-giving relationship with Jesus, being a Christian can **seem like** an oppressive system of rules and obligations. No doubt some of us in this room this morning experience Christianity this way; just the thought of reading your Bible, praying, giving to the poor, and living at peace with others in the body of Christ seems overwhelming (or impossible).

Whatever your burdens, notice what Jesus is offering here. In verse 29 Jesus explains that this rest is a byproduct of discipleship, a relationship in which you learn from Him how to live your life.

29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

A yoke was put on the back of an animal to pull a heavy load. If you put on a yoke, you were about to exert yourself. Jews in the first century sometimes spoke of "the yoke of the Law." If you took up the yoke of the Law, you committed yourself to learning and following the Law with all of its demands. Here Jesus says "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me." The command is to commit yourself to following Jesus and learning how to live out His teachings. The noun form of the word translated "learn" is the common word for disciple (a learner or pupil). Jesus is saying, "If you are weighed down with all sorts of burdens, become My disciple and learn from Me how to live your life."

You should take great comfort when Jesus adds, "for I am gentle and humble in heart." Following Jesus won't crush you because He is gentle at the core of His being. Jesus won't "use" you and throw you away because He is humble in heart. He doesn't merely look out for His own personal interests. He really does care about you and what you are experiencing in your life.

We recognize the last line of verse 29 from Jeremiah 6:16. Jesus does here what He often did. He is saying those who live as **His** disciples will also find rest for their souls (as opposed to turmoil and frustration and exhaustion). Jesus doesn't say how quickly we will experience this rest. Some people experience a type of rest and wholeness almost immediately after they begin following Christ. Others experience rest only after learning from Jesus over a period of time. Whatever your experience, rest is the byproduct of being a disciple.

Notice what Jesus says in verse 30:

30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

A better translation would be, "My yoke is **good/kind** and My burden is light." The same word is used in Romans 2:4 where we read that "the kindness of God leads us to repentance." Jesus wasn't promising that following Him would be easy. He was assuring us that His demands were **an expression of His kindness**. Compared to the burden of

the Pharisees or the burden of sin, Jesus' burden was light (see 1 John 5:3). Properly understood and skillfully obeyed, the commandments of Jesus don't leave you empty and burdened down.

Jesus was off the charts when it comes to emotional and relational intelligence. He knew how important it was for people to trust His motives. Generally speaking, if people aren't convinced that you're kind they won't hear a word you say. If people think you are arrogant and harsh and could care less about them personally, you won't have any influence in their lives. I think that's why Jesus said, "I am gentle and humble in heart. . . my yoke is an expression of My kindness and I am not wanting to burden you down." If you and I are going to follow Jesus from the heart (and not be selective about which commands we'll follow), we need to trust His motives.

Notice that Jesus is expecting the same type of intentionality we saw in Jeremiah 6:16. The verbs there were: **stand, see, ask, walk**. Here Jesus says: **come** to Me; **take** My yoke upon you; **learn** from Me. The point is that we each need to "own" our discipleship. Nobody can come to Christ for you; nobody can yoke you to Jesus; nobody can make you learn from Him. You are responsible to engage your will and to come to Jesus, take His yoke upon you, and learn from Him. You are responsible - meaning that we are **able to respond**. Being created in God's image, we have the ability (with His help) to respond to His commands.

This doesn't mean that you have to figure this all out and follow Jesus by yourself. Actually, if you try to follow Christ independent of other people, you are like the neighbor who poured a quart of water into his gas tank every month; we were designed to follow Christ in community. I'm excited about an opportunity we can offer you as an on-ramp to discipleship. One way (certainly not the only way) to be intentional about your discipleship is through Rooted (which Brian talked about earlier).

A Pathway to Discipleship (and rest): Rooted

A year ago Brian (our Equipping Pastor) became familiar with the Rooted material. Over the past year he led our staff and elders in a process of trying to discern whether or not we should adopt Rooted here at Faith as our core discipleship experience. Several of us went to Rooted training in Dallas, and we talked with other churches who have implemented Rooted. This past Fall we led 54 people through a Rooted pilot. Our experience this past fall confirmed that we should offer the Rooted experience to the entire church. We became convinced that God could use Rooted in our core mission of making disciples here at Faith.

Those who take Rooted with the type of intentionality we've been discussing today can actually establish daily and weekly habits that will help them learn from Jesus how to live their lives.

Let me give an example of how God did a work in my life through Rooted. . . The topic for Week Five of Rooted is "The Enemy"; it's about spiritual warfare. The first four days explore foundational truths about Satan, temptation, spiritual armor, and the flesh. The

fifth day raises the topic of strongholds; a stronghold is basically an area of a person's life in which s/he has (knowingly or unknowingly) allowed the enemy permission to have his way. A stronghold is an area of your life in which you've basically said, "Thanks but no thanks" to God; you're siding with the enemy in the way you think about this area of your life.

This is not a new topic for me; I've become aware of various strongholds (and potential strongholds) over the years. But the morning I worked through the Scriptures and readings on strongholds, the Holy Spirit revealed something to me I'd never seen before. The workbook has a list of a dozen common strongholds. As I read the descriptions of these strongholds, the one entitled **Despair** stopped me in my tracks. Examples given are: hopelessness, self-pity, isolation, addictions, self-harm. The lie associated with despair is: "Even God has abandoned me."

Over the last couple of years I had developed a sense of despair in relation to my work here at Faith. I had a growing sense of dread about my remaining years as a pastor here. Over time I developed some obsessive thoughts that were almost paralyzing at times. This may surprise some of you since I'm often lighthearted and positive. Like many of you I'm rather skillful at hiding what's really happening in my soul.

Some weeks I would block out time to study and prepare to teach, and I felt completely alone, as if God had abandoned me and I was responsible to muscle a sermon in my own strength. I found myself thinking, "If I weren't a pastor my life would be more fruitful." I actually found myself thinking that being a pastor is a hindrance to my walk with God. If that sounds twisted, it's because it is. In what universe is spending the best hours of your week in prayer and Bible study a hindrance to your walk with God?

Once I saw this despair as a stronghold, I immediately had a sense of hope because "Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8)! Rather quickly I identified some very distinct lies that were dominating my thinking about my work here at Faith as a pastor. The thought of this may freak you out, but when I come to Rooted that week I was able to lay all this out to my group (the men and women met separately); I exposed the lies I'd been believing, confessed them to God; the other men prayed for me. God met me there. I'm experiencing a type of freedom and satisfaction that was waning in my life. When those lies come back to mind, I recognize them rather quickly. I share all of this as an example of the type of thing God can do through Rooted. It was a way for me to learn from Jesus as a disciple.

Our challenge to you is to adopt the type of intentionality we see in Scripture and come to Jesus, apprentice yourself to Him, and let Him teach you how to live your life. Rooted is a great pathway to this type of discipleship. Rooted is for people in every stage of their journey with Christ; it's for those who are beginning to explore what it means to walk with Christ or whether you've been walking with Christ for decades.

Trust Jesus' motives; He is gentle and humble and kind. Remember His promise: you will find rest for your soul.