

Discipleship: Mission, Identity, Lifestyle

Matthew 7:24-29

In 2006 the National Basketball Association put in place the famous “one and done” rule. The rule basically says that you can no longer go straight from high school to the pros. You now have to be at least one year out of high school and at least 19 years old before going pro. Of course people disagree on whether the one and done rule is a good idea or not – whether or not it’s good for college basketball or for pro basketball. But everybody agrees that if a one-and-done player cares only about himself and his stats, the team will suffer. A superstar who doesn’t really care whether or not his team wins is ultimately a liability. Everybody agrees that basketball is a team sport that requires a commitment to the goals/mission of the team.

Something similar can be said about the body of Christ. Discipleship is essentially a “team sport.” Jesus never intended for a disciple to care only about his/her own well-being and not the overall mission of the church. Both the individual disciple and the church will suffer if we’re not all committed to each other and the mission that Jesus gave us.

As we finish up our sermon series on discipleship, I want to remind of the context of discipleship – what Jesus had in mind all along in terms of our mission, our identity, and our lifestyle as disciples. Unless we are clear about these things, “discipleship” can become a rather self-centered pursuit. We’re no different from the one-and-done player who says, “I don’t really care about my team. I just want what’s best for me.” We can become fixated on what Jesus can do for “me and mine” and miss the fact that He had something much larger in mind. There is a sense in which your relationship with Jesus *is* about you; Jesus wants to do more *for* you and *in* you than you can imagine. But those things don’t happen by becoming self-centered; those things happen as you give your life away. In some ways it’s counter-intuitive - - - until you experience it. But once you experience the exhilaration of giving your life away, you’ll buy into Jesus’ original intentions for His disciples.

Our Mission as Jesus’ Disciples: Making Disciples of “all the nations.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

After His resurrection, Jesus met with His disciples and made the following claim:

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

In light of the mission He was about to give them (and us), believing that He had all authority was vital. We need to believe that Jesus has more authority/influence/clout/say than any government, organization, employer, family or friends, circumstances, or unseen spiritual forces. Jesus even has more authority than your “past”; He has more say in your life than the mistakes you’ve made and the sins you’ve committed. If we don’t believe that Jesus has *all* authority, we’ll have a hard time taking seriously the mission He gives in verses 19 and 20:

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The main verb in this sentence is the command “make disciples of all the nations” (among all groupings of people). Three participles show three different aspects of making disciples: going,

baptizing, and teaching. To make someone a disciple is to bring someone to the place where s/he is a devoted student of a teacher. In first-century Palestine, if you became someone's disciple, your "teacher" (or rabbi) became like a father to you. You now became more loyal to your teacher than to your own parents.

A disciple is learning how to live like his teacher lives (and accepts the consequences of that lifestyle). That's why we talk about discipleship as an apprenticeship to Jesus. The command to "make disciples" was a command to bring people to the place where they become devoted students of Jesus, learning from Him how to live as He lived. Of course before we can **make** disciples, we have to **be** disciples. People who aren't apprenticed to Jesus will have neither the motivation nor the ability to help others become like Christ. The reason we spent 20 weeks studying the Sermon on the Mount is because it describes how to live like Jesus lived.

A few minutes ago we prayed for those who are doing short-term missions and other types of ministries this summer. Sometimes we send out career missionaries to serve in other cultures in other parts of the world. But we need to understand that the mission of making disciples isn't delegated to missionaries. Every single disciple of Jesus should "own" the mission of making disciples. That mission will be lived out in different ways in different contexts, but the mission is the same.

We actually have in our midst some wonderful examples of people who own this mission and conduct themselves here in our community in the same way that "missionaries" conduct themselves in other cultures. Instead of viewing "outreach" or "service" as something optional or as something to fit into their lives when possible, it's a life/lifestyle. People are actually giving away their lives as an expression of their discipleship.

Some do this through involvement in established agencies or ministries such as Habitat or the Emergency Shelter or Life Choice Ministries. Some are passionate about reaching children for Christ – both in the church and in our community; VBS, for example, isn't merely a good program – it's an expression of our desire to make disciples among children (and their families). Some pour out their lives through campus ministries or international student ministry. Some sense that God has called them to represent Him in their neighborhoods; consequently they invest deeply in relationships and they get involved in issues that matter in their neighborhoods. Some have adopted an open door policy in which their homes are a refuge for friends and for hurting people; and people are beating a path to their doorstep. Those who lead our Alpha ministry pour out their lives so that people might have a safe place to learn and discuss the faith. I'm describing ways in which people own the mission of the church. This should be the norm, not the rare exception.

Our mission flows from our identity. Turn with me to Matthew 5. In John 8 Jesus said of Himself, "I am the light of the world." But in Matthew 5 Jesus says to His disciples, "You are the light of the world." We are meant to be more than disciples in name only; we are meant to do the very works that Jesus did.

Our Identity as Jesus' Disciples: "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14-16) Jesus is speaking explicitly to His disciples – those who were His apprentices in the Kingdom of God. In 5:14 we read:

14 You are the light of the world. . .

As His disciples, we are supposed to accept this identity. We aren't the light of the world in *exactly* the same way that Jesus is. By His very nature/essence He is the light of the world. We are the light of the world because we have Him. We are the light of the world because we are apprenticed to Him and are therefore becoming more and more like Him.

Look at the rest of verse 14 and verse 15. Jesus emphasizes that our calling as the light of the world is an *obvious* thing. It's not something we try really hard to be once a week or once a month. No, we shine light into the darkness because we can't do anything else.

14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

You cannot be apprenticed to Him and *not* shine as the light of the world. You might as well try to hide the city of Jerusalem. That would be as unnatural and odd as lighting a lamp and putting it under a bucket. No, you light a lamp and put it on a lampstand to give light to everybody in the house.

If Jesus were standing here today, He would say to us: "You are the light of the world. Just like I brought the light into the darkness when I lived in Palestine in the first century, you are called to bring light into the darkness in Manhattan, Kansas in the 21st century." You and I both know people (and groups of people) who are living in spiritual darkness. That's not an insult; it's simply a spiritual reality because we are all born in this darkness.

Jesus expects you and me to be the light of the world to such people. Jesus expects us to shine our light and show people a way out of their darkness. How do we do that? Verse 16 tells us:

16 Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Simply put, we live out our calling as the light of the world by our good works. The Sermon on the Mount itself explains many of those good works. When you bless those who curse you, you are shining the light in a dark place. When you notice needs around you and seek to meet those needs, you are shining light in a dark place. When you give to people expecting nothing in return, you are shining your light. When you are merciful to people who don't deserve it, you are like your Father in heaven and you shine the light. Jesus wants whole churches full of such people.

If we are going to pursue the mission Jesus gave us of making disciples among every grouping of people in our world, and if we are going to shine like lights in this world through our good works, what type of lifestyle is necessary? In Luke 9 Jesus tells us:

Our Lifestyle as Disciples: "Losing our lives" for Jesus' sake. (Luke 9:23-24) After explaining that His mission as the Messiah would involve going to the cross before being raised up on the third day, Jesus says this about those who wish to "come after" Him:

23 And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.

Jesus never tried to hide what it would cost people to follow Him. He never begged people to follow Him. Here Jesus simply says, “If anyone wishes to come after Me. . .” Jesus readily acknowledged that not everybody wants to follow Him. If you don’t really want to follow after Jesus, the pattern of discipleship is going to seem completely unreasonable. Ultimately, if you don’t really want to follow Jesus, you will find Jesus’ teaching impossible.

Jesus *first* tells people who “wish to come after” Him: he must **deny himself**. The verb “deny” is sometimes translated “disown” or “denounce.” This involves renouncing everything within us that is at odds with our apprenticeship to Jesus. We’ve seen lots of things in the SoM we need to renounce about ourselves if we want to follow Jesus: anger, lust, retaliation, greed, anxiety, trying to impress others with our righteousness, etc.

Second, Jesus tells people who “wish to come after” Him: he must **take up his cross daily**. In the first century in the Roman Empire, if you “took up your cross” you were about to be crucified; you were on “a one-way journey . . . [you’d] not be back” (Leon Morris, *Luke*, p. 170). If we want to follow Jesus, we need to die to self. We need to die to anything that is at odds with the will of God. Notice that Jesus said we must take up our cross **daily**. This isn’t a one-time decision. This is a settled way of life.

Third, Jesus tells people who “wish to come after” Him: **follow Me**. To follow Jesus means to accept His truth and walking in it. This certainly includes following Jesus in His mission as the Messiah. It would be strange to be apprenticed to a master mechanic and never actually work on cars. It would be strange to be apprenticed to a master painter and never paint. It would be equally strange to be apprenticed to the Messiah and not be involved in making disciples from every grouping of people on earth. Following Jesus will involve following Him in being the light of the world and of making disciples of all the nations.

In verse 24 we have one of Jesus’ paradoxical statements that emphasizes the reward of discipleship and the consequences of non-discipleship.

24 "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.

This is what we talked about at the men’s retreat: we all develop strategies to make our lives work independent of God. We protect ourselves in all sorts of ways; we seek out things that will make us feel loved or secure or significant. Sometimes these strategies are obviously sinful; other times they’re very socially acceptable. We’ve all developed habits of thinking and ways of living that make sense to us but that are at odds with the kingdom God is establishing. That is the life we have to decide whether we are going to save or lose.

You “save your life” by clinging to the life you have built independent of God. You save your life by refusing to deny yourselves and take up the cross daily. Jesus says that this person will look back and say, “I lost my whole life; I threw it all away.” That is one option.

You “lose your life for Jesus’ sake” by denying yourself, taking up your cross daily and following Jesus. In this way you allow Him to restructure the way you think and the way you speak and the way you act. At first it will feel like death. But eventually you will look back and

say, “Losing my life was the best thing I ever did. When I did that I really began to live.” You will actually discover your “self” for the first time; you’ll discover who you really are.

Our vision for Faith is to have a whole church full of people who “lose their life for Jesus sake.” In other words, a church full of disciples who are following Jesus with reckless abandon, realizing that that’s what life is all about. Instead of being full of fear and anxiety, trying to save the poor, cheap, stingy lives we’ve made for ourselves, we envision a church full of people who are so full to overflowing with the life of Christ that we give ourselves away. This will happen within the church, but it will also happen in the community.

Some of you are already doing this in amazing ways. Some of you may have never come to God and asked Him the question, “How do you want me to pour myself out in making disciples among all the groupings of people on the earth?” If you are apprenticed to Jesus, God wants to use you to make disciples here in Manhattan (and possibly in other places around the world). This will look different for different ones of us; it’s not a one-size-fits-all thing.

And we certainly wouldn’t advocate manufacturing artificial ministry opportunities. It’s simply a matter of noticing the existing, obvious needs around us in our community – just the way Jesus would. For example, that’s why we do Alpha – because there is an obvious, crying need for a safe place where people can discuss the claims and teachings of Christ.

Here’s another example of an obvious need that is begging for someone to address. A few weeks ago I heard an interview with Donald Miller (the Blue Like Jazz guy) that I can’t quit thinking about. He’s become passionate about mentoring boys who are growing up in families without a dad. Statistics show that 95% of people in prison in America are men and that 85% of them grow up in families without a dad. It’s not a cure-all, but boys with a man in their lives have great advantages. There are 30 million kids growing up without dads. I talked with one of the case managers down at Big Brothers Big Sisters the other day: they’ve got between 30 and 40 kids waiting for a big brother or big sister; ¾ of those are boys waiting for a big brother.

And so Donald Miller has started The Mentoring Project. He’s trying to recruit 1,000 churches to raise up 10 mentors each. That’s 10,000 boys who now have someone who is befriending them and speaking into their lives. Only God knows the long-term impact of those relationships. I keep wondering if there are 10 or 20 men here at Faith who might be drawn to that type of investment in the lives of boys in our church and in our community. I don’t know what God would have for us, but it seems compatible with our mission to raise up mentors who will pour out their lives on behalf these kids.

Conclusion. If you are a disciple of Jesus, are you actually committed to the mission of making disciples among groups of people here in Manhattan? Have you accepted our identity as the light of the world – believing that our good works should shine like lights in the dark? Have you adopted a lifestyle of losing your own life so that the life of Christ can flow through you to others? If not, why not?

In light of what the Scriptures say about our mission, identity, and lifestyle, and in light of what God is doing in our midst, this is no time to be complacent. These are days for full-out apprenticeship to Jesus.