

Called to a Life of Discipleship

Though I've been back from my sabbatical now for three weeks, this is my first opportunity to stand in front of you and so I wanted to say thank you for the gift of a sabbatical. It was personally and spiritually refreshing. It was great for Cindy and my marriage. It afforded some great time with our kids including a 2-week trip to Alaska. And as is often the case when we have time to slow down and think deeply, it was a time to be reminded of some core things about my life with God. This morning what I want to share really flows out of these reflections. These things flow out of some of the great books I read this summer as well as from my time in the scriptures.

Since my sabbatical was three months long, I decided that I would read and re-read a different gospel each month. And so over the course of the three months I probably read Matthew, Mark and Luke each around 5 or 6 times. In other words, I read and reflected on them a lot. As I did this, I was reminded and saw fresh insights into how amazing Jesus Christ is. God stirred my faith. He messed with my prayer life in good ways. And one of the things that I was reminded of is that I am called to a life of discipleship. It's this area that I want us to think about this morning.

For most of us what I want to share this morning is not new stuff. But sometimes we just need to be reminded of things that we already know. And so the thing that I want to remind you of is that:

I. Jesus Calls Us to a Life of Discipleship

Jesus calls YOU to a life of discipleship. Now, as most of you know, a disciple is a learner, a student, a follower. It is a relationship that is not unique to Jesus. John the Baptist had disciples; the Pharisees had disciples. In the Greek world of philosophers of the time there were those who sought out to be a student of a certain philosopher to attach himself to that person to follow him and the principles that he taught. Jesus calls us to this kind of master-disciple/teacher-student relationship.

We see the call to a life of discipleship in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus calls us to *make disciples*. We are to help others enter into this master-disciple relationship with Jesus. But it is not just something that we are to do with others; this defines the nature of our relationship with Jesus as well. When we come to faith in Jesus, the rest of our life is to be about being a disciple learning to *observe all that* [Jesus] *commanded* [us]. And by *observe*, it means obey.

As Jesus started his public ministry, he called twelve men to be with him, to follow him and learn from him. In Matthew 4:18-22 we read:

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Later in Matthew 9:9 is says:

⁹ As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

Eventually, Jesus formalized this relationship with the twelve. Mark 3:13-14 says:

¹³ And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. ¹⁴ And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.

He appointed them *that they might be with him*. And so as we read the gospels, they were with him. They walked where he walked. They observed his life. They sat under his teaching. They interacted over the things he said and did. Jesus gave them assignments. Sometimes they were successful; sometimes they failed. But in either case, they learned from Jesus.

And so this relationship of the twelve is a model for us. We too are called into a life of discipleship with Jesus. We cannot physically follow him around, but we are called to be learners from Jesus through His Word. He is the master/teacher; we are to be disciples/learners.

Here's how Dallas Willard defines this relationship:

Discipleship is the relationship I stand into Jesus Christ in order that I might take on his character. As his disciple, I am learning from him how to live my life in the Kingdom as he would if he were I. The natural outcome is that my behavior is transformed. Increasingly, I routinely and easily do the things he said and did.

(Willard as quoted by Bill Hull in *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 16)

And so discipleship is about taking on Jesus' character. It is learning to live my life in the kingdom as he would if he would if he were I.

This call to discipleship is the normal Christian life. But unfortunately, sometimes we tend to think this it is just a call for the really serious. A few days ago, I read this in an email that I subscribe to from Peter Scazzero. He wrote:

A number of years ago, I was asked by a good friend: “Why do so many Christians make such lousy human beings?” She shared how she had grown tired of the judgmentalism, the defensiveness, the superficiality, and the lack of self-awareness of many in church.

Scazzero goes on and writes:

Bill Hull summarizes the problem well: “We evangelicals accept and even encourage a two-level Christian experience in which serious Christians pursue and practice discipleship, while grace and forgiveness are for everyone else.”

There is not to be a two-level Christian experience. This call to discipleship is for all of us not just the serious and really devout. It’s not just for when we were in college involved in a discipleship ministry. Jesus calls you and me to a lifetime of discipleship!

Now, when you read the gospels, you come to understand that a life of discipleship is not necessarily an easy life. And so I want to pose the question, “Why would we want to live a life of discipleship?” On one hand I could answer, “Because Jesus said so,” and that ought to be enough, but there is a better answer and that is this:

II. The “Good” Life is Found through a Life of Discipleship

Have you ever thought about what the “good” life is . . . really? Our culture would say the good life is about wealth and power and pleasure. It’s driving that Lincoln that Matthew McConaughey drives. It’s being able to retire early. It’s doing whatever you feel like doing with your body. It’s being independent and free from anyone’s control.

But if we allow the scriptures to form our thinking about the “good” life, we see that it is found in turning from self to Christ and letting Him teach us how to live. Let me offer one more thought from Willard. He says this:

Jesus understood that only the person who is becoming good, as God views and intends good, is able to live the good life.

(Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence*, 51)

And so the good life is only found by becoming a good person as God defines good. And so this what we see modeled during Jesus’ earthly life. He calls the twelve disciples so that they could be with him, to follow him around, to see his life so that he might teach them about how to live, specifically how to live life in the kingdom of God. This was the life of discipleship to which they were called.

I want to think for a bit about Jesus' gospel. Sometimes we tend to think that the core message he proclaimed was the forgiveness of sins through his death and resurrection. And though that certainly is part of the message that he proclaimed, Jesus' gospel was about the arrival of a kingdom – the kingdom of God.

Mark 1:14-15 says:

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Jesus' gospel was an announcement about the arrival of the kingdom of God. He says that it *is at hand*. It is here. So *repent and believe*.

The kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God. It has always existed, but with the coming of Jesus into the world, he made it possible for people to enter into and actually live in the kingdom of God . . . now. And so the kingdom is not just a future possibility, it is a present reality that can be known and experienced through Jesus as people repent and turn away from their old lives towards Christ. Jesus proclaimed that it was available because he was bringing it in his own person and he demonstrated this reality of the in breaking of the kingdom by healing the sick, the deaf and the dumb and by casting out demons (Matt. 11:5).

Jesus' call to discipleship is really a call to learn to live in the kingdom of God. As believers in Christ, this is our destiny. There will a day when either Jesus returns, like Russ talked about last week, or when we die and go to heaven that the presence of sin in our lives will be completely gone. And we will then do God's will perfectly. But the good news that Jesus' proclaimed is that we can enter into that life now because the kingdom of God is here. And we learn how to enter into that life more and more as we live a life of discipleship.

And so as we live a life of discipleship, we grow in our ability to live in a way that is consistent with the kingdom of God, and as we do that we experience a life that is truly good. When we live according to the kingdom of God, we become a Psalm 1 person who . . .

*³ He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.*

That's the good life. It's a life of flourishing regardless of what circumstances may bring. It's a life of rest. Jesus said in Matthew 11:

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Paul says this about this life:

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17)

It's a life of godly character. It's a life of peace and joy. This kind of life is found as we more and more live consistent with the kingdom of God.

Here's how I'd sum up this point. Jesus brought the kingdom of God and he made it possible for us to live in the kingdom now. And Jesus has the best knowledge and information about the kingdom of God and how we can live consistent with the kingdom that we might experience all of these things. And it is only as we follow Jesus in a life of discipleship that we learn how to live in the kingdom and truly experiencing the “good” life. Do you want this?

And so that brings us to our final point and that is that if we want to find the good life . . .

III. We Must Choose to Follow Jesus in a Life of Discipleship

A life of discipleship IS the normal Christian life. It is for all of us. But it doesn't just happen. It is a choice. We must decide to walk as a disciple of Jesus.

Ortberg puts it this way:

Many people think of Jesus as our Savior, as the one who will get us into heaven. So the question often is, ‘Have I accepted Jesus as my Savior?’ But we never ask the question, ‘Have I accepted Jesus as my teacher?’ And that's the real question. With the disciples, it began there. They began by accepting him as their teacher, and then accepting him as their Savior- which included, of course, their eternal destiny - was a natural outflow of that” (Ortberg in *Living in Christ's Presence*, 45).

When I read this question this summer, “Have I accepted Jesus as my teacher?” it struck me in a profound way. Have I really settled the matter that Jesus is the authority in my life? Of course I've accepted him as my Savior, but have I decided that he will be the one from whom I will learn?

How about you? Now, your gut level response might be to say, “Of course I have,” but don't be too quick to assume that this is the case. Have you really? Have I really?

Let me offer a couple of scenarios. Suppose you have someone who has it out for you at work. They take credit for work that you've done. They tell lies about you to try to de-

rail your advancement at your company. They are just plain mean to you. They are a kind of enemy. And as you think about how you are going to respond, you have friends that are telling you that you have every right to try get even. Everything within you wants to make them pay for the hurt that they have caused you. At the very least you'd love to just write them off.

But Jesus says this.

²⁷ "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Luke 6

Who are you going to listen to? Who will be your teacher? Your natural instincts? Your friends? Or Christ?

Here's another issue. How will you handle your sexuality? You live in a culture that says that sex is no big deal. If you want to have sex with someone go for it. Just be safe. It is just a physical encounter. If it is two consenting adults, go for it.

Now, Jesus spoke to our sexuality in terms of what constitutes adultery. He said that if a man even looks at a woman with lust he has committed adultery (Matt. 5:27-28). And when you look for wisdom about our sexuality in the scriptures we find that scripture affirms that sex is a good gift from God (Song of Songs), but that it is a gift that is only to be expressed in the context of covenant of marriage (Gen. 2:24-25). All sex outside of marriage is forbidden (1 Cor. 6:9).

And so, who will you listen to? The culture? Your passions and desires? Or Christ and the wisdom of Scripture?

Here's another one. Suppose as you are walking with Jesus you are finding that he is changing your values and things that are important to you. And so you are responding and your lifestyle is changing. As these changes are happening, you find that your family is increasingly in opposition. They don't like your new values. They even mock them. Maybe you even sense that God redirecting the direction of your life's calling and as you begin to follow Jesus into that calling, your family is turning up the heat to abandon such thoughts. But you are clear, Jesus is leading you this direction. Who are you going to listen to?

Jesus said:

²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

Jesus is using hyperbole here to make the point that devotion to one's family cannot come before one's devotion to him. Jesus comes first. That's what he is talking about here.

And so who will you listen to? Your family that you love and whose approval you so long for? Or will you listen to Jesus?

I could offer a lot more examples, but I think you get the point. And so I come back to the question, "Have you accepted Jesus as your teacher?" Is he the authority in your life? Have you chosen to follow Jesus into a life of discipleship?

Or, would you say that there are other teachers that you are listening to to determine how you will live? It might be your family of origin. It might be social media. It might be the prevailing culture. It might be a friend. It might just be your own common sense. Now maybe you are not listening to such teachers in every area of your life, but only in some areas. Jesus doesn't really give us the option of only following him in some areas. We are talking about life in a kingdom. And we should not think that we can live our lives however we want and that that is going to be okay with the king. He calls for total allegiance.

And so you must decide, who are you going to learn from? Who will be your teacher? Will you choose to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship? Let me encourage you to prayerfully consider this question this week? Ask God to show you. Is the matter settled?

Now, even if we have decided to follow Jesus, in this world we will never do so perfectly. And so I want to offer a kind of daily practice that can be helpful. This summer as I've been thinking about walking as a disciple, I've been asking myself this question: Have I walked as a disciple today? Often as I'm getting ready for bed, I'm asking myself this question. And it lets me either be encouraged by my day or in some cases to confess my failure to listen to Jesus and renew my commitment to do so tomorrow. Let me encourage you to consider making that a kind of daily discipline in your life.

Earlier I mentioned the story where Pete Scazzero's friend asked why so many Christians make such lousy human beings. When his friend saw Christians, she saw judgmentalism, defensiveness, superficiality, and lack of self-awareness. What if we would write a different story? What if we collectively would walk a life of discipleship allowing Jesus to teach us and transform us so that when people look at us they see love of a different kind? What if they saw compassion and gentleness? What if they saw the most generous and other-centered people they ever encountered? What if they saw moral goodness? What if we walk a life of discipleship such that when people see us, they see Christ and they are compelled to come and see and they too find Christ?! Isn't that Jesus' plan?