

Over the last couple of months, we've been looking a lot at the first part of Jesus' command to His followers, including us, in the Great Commission. We've been focusing on the "GO" part of the command, which says that we are to be reaching out to the lost around us to share the life-giving message of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. This morning, we're going to look at the rest of that sentence. Please stand with me as we read Matthew 28: 19-20. (READ)

The second part of the command is to make disciples. I recently read an excellent book called "Rediscovering Discipleship" by Robby Gallaty and, just for the sake of disclosure, I am borrowing heavily from that book for this sermon.

Many people in the church today don't recognize the term, "discipleship", and many who do know the term don't really understand what it means. The concept should be familiar. "Disciple" means "follower". So, for instance, a psychiatrist might be called a "disciple" of Freud if he follows Sigmund Freud's theories and methods. A jazz trumpeter might be called a "disciple" of Wynton Marsalis if he imitates his

playing style. Another example would be a beginning electrician or plumber who learns their trade by becoming an "apprentice". They become a disciple of a more experienced electrician or plumber.

The word "disciple" is used in the gospels and in Acts to refer to the twelve men who Jesus selected to travel with him, those who He chose to teach and train personally. "Disciple" means "follower," or "student". The word "disciple" goes away after the book of Acts because the audiences of the later books were primarily Greek and Roman, and to them that word was specific to Jewish rabbis, so while the concept was the same, the word was changed to something they could relate to, such as "saint" or "follower". When we refer to Christians as disciples, we are identifying them as followers of Jesus Christ; as students of his life and teachings. But there's something more. The word also carries the idea of imitation. True disciples of Jesus Christ are those who are not only seeking to understand Christianity in an intellectual sense, but who are seeking to be like Jesus. Disciples of Christ are people

who are modeling their lives after his, who are walking according to the example he gave us.

Matthew 16:24 says, "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.'"

When Jesus said that we should "follow" him, he wasn't talking about literally strapping on a pair of sandals and walking with him along the dusty roads of ancient Palestine. [As great as that would be]. No, he meant that we should follow his example; that we should live the way he lived; that we should obey his commands; listen to his teachings; look to him as our teacher and guide. That's what it means to "follow," that's what it means to be a disciple, that's what it means to be a Christian.

So far this sounds like an individual pursuit. What part does the church play in this process? For the answer to that question, listen to what Paul says in Philippians 3:17, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."

That may sound very arrogant - Be like me! Do what I do! Follow my example! ...Until you realize that Paul was really telling them to follow Christ. They were to follow Paul's example, but only as that example was faithful to the life and teachings of Christ. As he wrote in I Corinthians 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

So, we study Christ by reading the gospels - observing Him as He encounters all kinds of people: we watch and listen as He relates to children, to family members, to soldiers, kings, poor people, wealthy people, hurting people, needy people, religious hypocrites, and to false disciples. As we read the gospels, we see how Jesus relates to God the Father. We see His courage, His compassion, His wisdom, His humility, His patience, His strength. And having studied Christ in the gospels, we do our best to imitate Him, by the power of the Holy Spirit. But here's where the church comes in - We also grow as disciples of Christ by observing and following the example of other believers. What did Paul say in Philippians 3:17? "Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."

That means that there should be those in the congregation whose lives are worthy of imitation. It means that, in addition to the pastors, normally in a church, over time, as people become more mature spiritually, their lives become more and more reliable as examples of what it means to be godly. The normal thing for a Christian is not that we remain at the lowest level of knowledge and experience; not that we learn just enough to get in the door and then put the Bible on the shelf. The normal, expected thing is to have many people in the body who can teach, who can counsel, whose attitudes and conduct can serve as examples for others to follow.

Did you ever consider the fact that pretty much every one of you has people who are watching you and learning from you? Parents, look at your kids. They watch you. They learn to speak from you, and so they speak like you. They (at least to some degree) get their attitudes and opinions from listening to yours. They learn to walk by watching you. What are they learning about Christ, and about what Christ really

means to you, by watching you? They are your disciples, for good or for bad.

Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

You might say, "Well, I'm just not a teacher. That's not my gift." And that may be true. Maybe God hasn't called you to stand in front of a group of people and explain the Scriptures. But God has called you to teach on a one-to-one basis. You can call that counseling, you can call that exhortation, you can call that just being an encourager, but God has called you to build up the other members of the body by sharing with them your knowledge, and your insights, and your experiences. Of course, in order to do that, you have to have some knowledge. You have to have some insight. And you have to have experiences of trusting and following God that you can share with others. Which brings us to our next point:

Our goal as followers of Christ is to become mature in the faith. To gain understanding. To develop wisdom. To experience, over time, what it means to walk with God. Not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others, so that we can show others the way to God through our conduct and our counsel. Brothers and sisters, I'm speaking to everyone in this room. God expects you to study, and pray, and obey, and trust, not just so that you can be a better Christian, not just for your own spiritual benefit, but so that you can teach others to follow Him as well. Listen to what Hebrews 5:12-14 says about our maturity - "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

In other words, after you've been around a while, after some time has passed, your level of knowledge, and understanding, and experience should be greater than when you were just beginning. The normal Christian life is one of constant learning, constant growth, constant exercise and strengthening of our faith. To be a "disciple" is to be a lifelong learner. And to be successful, we need to be convinced that knowing God is worth the time and effort... Because it does take time and effort. It takes work. It takes commitment. If we expect it to come easily, we will always be spiritual babies. We will never become mature because maturity just doesn't come easily.

James 1:4 says, "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

And Ephesians 4:11-14 says, "It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining

to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."

What do these verses tell us? That maturity is a process. That discipleship is a process. That it doesn't come quickly. That we need to persevere in the faith, because growth takes time. That's why we associate age with wisdom. Just as the glory of youth is beauty and strength; so, the glory of age is wisdom and knowledge. As Job says in Job 32:7, "Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom."

But attaining wisdom isn't just a matter of time passing. In my career as a manager, I knew a number of people who had 20 or 30 years of experience, but I also knew a number of people who had 1 year of experience 20 or 30 times. There's a huge difference, and some folks just never learned and grew from their experience. We don't become mature just by living a certain number of years. You don't suddenly wake up on your 60th or 70th birthday and find that you've become

wise. Those years have to be spent in the study and application of the truth, otherwise, you'll just end up an old fool. If you want to be a respected source of instruction and counsel as you grow older, then you have to be seeking God now, and all throughout your life.

Is knowing God worth this kind of sustained effort? Is it worth a life of effort and perseverance? Yes, it's more than worth it. 1 Timothy 4:7-10 says, " . . . Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe."

Are you "laboring and striving" to follow Christ? Are you training yourself in godliness? If we keep seeking God, He promises we will find what we're looking for. If we earnestly seek Him (not half-heartedly, but earnestly), He will reward us. And God's rewards are always worth the cost.

So, the church helps us to follow Christ because it provides the setting in which we teach one another and train one another and learn from one another. Through our counsel and our witness, we share our experiences, our wisdom, our knowledge, our understanding. Through our lives, we demonstrate to one another what it looks like to seek after God, what it looks like to live for Christ.

But not only does the church provide an opportunity for all of us to teach one another; it is also through the church that God provides those who are uniquely gifted and qualified for the teaching ministry, and we also become skilled in following Christ by giving heed to what they say, and by observing how they live. Pastors are not only given authority in the church, they are given a larger responsibility and held to a higher standard. Pastor Bobbi and I have a responsibility to teach with diligence and integrity and to live lives that are to be and reflection of Christ. I can't speak for Bobbi, but I will confess that there are times in my life when that reflection is pretty dim. But I try, and I'm hopefully continuing to grow and improve. And just like we have those

responsibilities, so those of you in the seats out there have a duty not just to listen to what we say, but to also watch what we do. That's where the rubber meets the road. So, how do you know if our teaching is to be trusted? How do you know if what we have to say is worthy of acceptance?

First, look at our lives. If our conduct contradicts our teaching, then find another teacher. If we don't practice what we preach, then find another preacher. When Paul was defending his authority as an apostle, he pointed to both his teaching and his behavior:

In 2 Timothy 3:11 Paul says, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings--what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured."

A pastor ought to be able to say, with Paul, not only "do what I say," but more importantly, "do what I do." If you ever hear any pastor or leader say, "do as I say, not as I do", it's time to find a new pastor or leader. A pastor ought to be able to invite people to follow his example as he follows Christ.

Second, (but just as important, if not more-so than our example) judge what we say by the standard of the Scriptures. Don't take anything for granted. Check it out. Make sure that everything we teach is consistent with God's Word. This isn't you being hard-headed or rebellious, it's being faithful. In fact, God calls it "noble". Acts 17:11 says, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

Let me make one more point before we close. If a disciple is a "follower," and we are disciples of Christ, it follows that we are willing to be led. We are willing to be led into places that we don't understand; even places that are dark, and scary, and painful, and unpleasant; because we trust the One we are following. We are like sheep who trust and follow their shepherd.... The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...

Before we close, let me ask you a few questions: Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? Not, "do you believe in Christ," and not, "are you a church member," and not even "do you give,

and serve, and attend," but are you a disciple? Are you a follower? Are you a learner? Do you study the word? Do you read the Scriptures regularly? Do you think about how you can bring your life into harmony with His teachings? Do you think about how you can imitate His example? Do you evaluate your life on a regular basis - at the end of each day; or week, or month, or year - and consider whether you are growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ? Are you actively seeking to develop Christlike character; have you identified some character qualities that you want to develop, and some that you want to discard? Are you living in peace with others in the congregation? Do you seek reconciliation when there's a conflict? Do you forgive and ask forgiveness? Are you confessing your sins to God, and asking his forgiveness, and seeking his grace to forsake those sins? Are you praying?

All of these are descriptions of a disciple of Jesus Christ; they form a picture of what it looks like to follow Christ. How do you measure up? If you're like me, probably not as well as you would like. But that's OK. Start where you are. And

wherever you are, I urge you to decide now, today, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you are going to follow Christ, that you are going to be a disciple, a follower, an apprentice of Christ. I pray that you will do this, both for your sake, and for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ who need you to be an example to them and to their children.

Before I close today, I wanted to mention – If you’ve been paying attention to the announcement slides, there has been one saying that we will be having an “Intro to Discipleship” class next Sunday afternoon starting at 12:45 and going until probably somewhere around 2 or 2:30. This class is only an introduction, and Bobbi and I are looking at how we can implement on-going discipleship opportunities in the church. If you are interested in starting or continuing in your discipleship process, I encourage you to come. There is a sign-up sheet on the table in the back so we can get a head count for handouts and such.

As I’ve been saying, discipleship is a life-long process and if you are breathing and are trying to grow to be more like Christ, then you are still going through that process. If you

aren't breathing, please see Pastor Bobbi and we can schedule your funeral. If you've never started the discipleship process because you've never accepted Christ as your savior, or if can't honestly say that you're trying to grow to be more like Christ, I encourage you to come during this next song. The altar is open.