

Discipleship

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 28**. It'll take us a little bit, but we'll get there. ~~College-football~~. If you're new, we're in a **series** called *In Knoxville as it is in Heaven*, which is a series all about how we participate with God in bringing aspects of heaven to earth. **Each week**, we've been looking at one glimpse we get in the Scriptures of what heaven will be like one day, and then doing our best to *implement* that into how we go about life now.

And the **glimpse at heaven we're getting today** comes from that passage we just read, **1 John 3**. No need to turn there, since you're already in Matthew. But essentially, that passage tells us that when Jesus comes back—when he returns to make all things right and all things new—on that day, we will be made “like him.” We will be brought to full *maturity* in Jesus, because we will “see him as he is.” In other words, there will be something about beholding Jesus, in his fullness, that will transform all of us to be exactly who he made us to be. Once and for all, on that day, we will become *like* Jesus.

And **followers of Jesus believe that because that is the *ultimate* goal, we also participate in becoming more like Jesus *now***. That's one aspect of how we bring “heaven” to earth: becoming more like Jesus. Now, the **word used most often** for that process in the bible is the word **discipleship**: becoming a disciple of Jesus. In the original language of the New Testament, *disciple* is the word **mathetes**, and most literally translated into English it would be “student” or “learner.” But I almost hesitate to use *those* words for it, because in our society, *student* and *learner* conjure up very different images than they did in Jesus' day. **When you and I hear those words, we probably picture a student in a classroom, or maybe someone at their desk, pouring over open books, taking in all they can.**

But you have to understand that in Jesus' day, the life of a student was **much more than that**. Being a *mathetes* didn't just mean you spent your time in a classroom or pouring over dense books. It meant that you *followed* a rabbi around from place to place. *Life* was the classroom, in other words. Hence *Jesus'* invitation to *his* disciples, “come and *follow* me.” When he said that, he didn't mean “study me,” or “agree with what I say,” or even “memorize the things that I say and be able to recite them when I ask you.” He meant, literally, “get up, and physically *follow* me. Go the places I go, do the things that I do, and learn how to do those things the way that I do them.” **Disciples of Jesus were those who followed him around and observed what he did, for the purpose of becoming *like* him.**

It's probably a lot closer to the way you and I use a word like "apprentice." So I had a friend once who was *apprenticing* to be a plumber. And the way the apprenticeship worked was not primarily that he sat in a classroom and read books about plumbing. There could've been *some* of that. But the vast majority of it was that he rode around in a truck with another plumber who had been doing it for a while. He crawled around under houses with that guy and watched him do his job. He would ask him follow-up questions during and after house calls that they made. And *that* was how he became a plumber, by *following another plumber* around and learning.

That is a lot closer to what the Bible means by *discipleship*. It's spending concentrated amounts of time with someone else, for the purpose of becoming like them. **When Jesus interacted with people, he didn't just call them to *listen* to him, or *learn* from him, or even just believe *right things* about him. He called people to *follow* him: to *apprentice* themselves to him, so that they might learn to live the way that he lived.** That's how the disciples became more like Jesus.

Now in the same way, when we talk about what it means to belong to Jesus *today*, or to "be a Christian," we aren't just talking about knowing true things about him, or believing correct things about him, or agreeing with things that he said. We're talking about *apprenticing* ourselves to Jesus and learning his way of life. Now, that obviously looks a little different for us today than it did then because he's not here in the flesh, but many of the same principles still apply.

So I always scratch my head when I hear people say things here in the South like "I've always *been* a Christian, but I've just recently started following Jesus." Or "I've always *believed* in Jesus, but I only recently started getting *serious* about *following* him." I think I understand what people *mean* when they say things like that, but in the bible, those are not separate categories. To believe in Jesus is to follow him. That's what that word *means*.

I'll explain it like this. Let's say you and I were having a conversation and you told me "I am a *vegetarian*." And then I said "oh gotcha—so you don't eat meat." And you said "oh no I eat meat." And so I would say "oh, like you eat *fish*, but you don't eat other stuff like red meat." And then you said "oh no, I eat *all* kinds of meat." And then I said "oh so eat meat on *occasion*, but not generally, in everyday life." And you said "no eat it for every meal." Eventually I would say "I have something you're not going to like to hear: you're actually not a vegetarian." And you couldn't get mad at *me* for telling you that, you'd have to get mad at a *dictionary* for telling you that, because that's just not what the word *vegetarian* means.

Okay, in the same way, I **don't think it's accurate for us** to describe ourselves as **followers of Jesus...if we aren't following Jesus**. Even the word *Christian*: the term *Christian* literally means "little Christ." As in, the early followers of Jesus thought of themselves and carried themselves like "little Jesuses," choosing to live like Jesus lived and act the way Jesus acted. So if we don't have *that* as our aim, we probably shouldn't claim that title. But if we *do* claim that title, that means we are participating in a life of *discipleship* to Jesus. We are learning from him how to go about life. We are *imitating* him.

Now all of that *means* that, in turn, **one of the things** we are imitating Jesus *in* is **discipling other people**. Helping *other* people to follow Jesus like we do. Or to put it another way, "*making* disciples." *That's* what I want to talk about today, and that's what **Matthew 28** is all about. So let's take a look, starting in v. 18:

Then Jesus came to them [his disciples] and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (that, in case you're wondering, is how you say "Jesus is Lord" in the first person: "all authority has been given to me"). 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

So these are Jesus' **parting instructions** to his disciples. As best we can tell, this is one of the final things he says before he goes to be with the Father until the day he comes back. And here's the thing: parting instructions are *important*, are they not? So important. **Think about every movie you've ever seen where someone delivers a final line as they take their last breaths. Usually it's vitally important stuff that they say.** And some of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples are "go and *make disciples*." **Go and take a vested interest in helping other people become more like Jesus.**

Now, notice there are **no real qualifiers** in this instruction. Jesus doesn't say "if you're really spiritually mature, go and make disciples." That wouldn't make sense. The absolute *longest* these people had been following him was three years...many of them, probably even less than that. They're not *incredibly spiritually mature* people. He also doesn't say, "those of you who are the most theologically *trained and educated*...you go make disciples." This would be the wrong crowd for *that* too—Acts is going to tell us that they were all "ordinary and untrained" in that regard.¹

¹ Acts 4:13

He *also* doesn't say—and maybe this hits a little bit closer to home for us—"if you **have some extra time** in your schedule and you're not that busy, go and make some disciples." He doesn't say "the main thing that matters is that you're saved. But if you think about it and the opportunity presents itself, maybe help some other people become more like Jesus too." And I get that I'm **belaboring my point right now**. But I need you to see, from this passage, that **helping others become more like Jesus is not some sort of auxiliary task or for super-Christians to do. It is a task for every single person who calls himself or herself a follower of Jesus.** It is *front and center* to what Jesus left us to do until returns: go and help other people become more like him.

So I guess my **first question for us today** is, in many ways, pretty simple: if you are in the room, and you consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus, are you regularly participating in *discipleship*? Are you regularly, actively *helping other people* become more like Jesus? Not like when you think about it and have time, but it is it a *goal* and *aim* of your life? Or, maybe another way of asking it would be this. **If we could take a worldwide survey of every single follower of Jesus on the planet—we can't, but if we could—and the question we asked was "who is currently, regularly, helping you become more like Jesus?" would your name show up on anybody's list?** Would anybody go "yep, *Nicholas* is helping me become more like Jesus." "Yep, *Selina* is helping me become more like Jesus." "Yep, *Ashley* is helping me become more like Jesus." Would *your name* show up in someone's answer to that question? **Honestly think about that for a second.**

Now please **hear my heart in asking that**: my aim isn't to shame anybody. I just ask it because I think to get anywhere with this idea of discipleship, we have to be honest with ourselves about where we're currently *at*. Because according to Jesus' parting instructions, at least *somebody* should be able to say that about *us*. **If we claim to follow Jesus, a necessary part of that is that we are regularly, actively helping others become more like Jesus. Every disciple, according to Jesus, is also a discipler.** That's the point of Matthew 28.

Now that said, I want to give us the **benefit of the doubt** this morning. I want to *assume* that, if you *aren't* currently making disciples as a follower of Jesus, it's not because you just don't *care* what Jesus said. *Maybe* that's true of you (and that's a different teaching for a different day), but I'm going to assume that it *isn't*. **For quite a few people I know, the obstacle to making disciples is not one of *desire*, but rather one of *experience*. They want to help other people follow Jesus—they just don't know where to start or what that looks like; what it consists of.** So I want to see if we can spend the rest of our time helping with *that*.

There's a guy named **Mark Dever** who pastors a church in Washington, D.C. From what I've heard, he is an incredible pastor and incredible disciple-maker. He has a great book out on discipleship, appropriately titled *Discipleship* (like I said, great at *discipleship*, maybe not so great at *creativity*). But in that book, he provides a great working definition of what discipleship *is* according to the bible. And sometimes, an idea from somebody else is so *good* that you just have to *steal* it. So today, I'm just gonna borrow *his* definition almost verbatim, give it to you all at once, and then we'll unpack each part of it. Sound good? Okay, here's the definition:

Discipling:
Initiating a relationship consisting of loving, teaching, modeling, and correcting, in order to help another person become more like Jesus.

Now, let's break each part of that down to help understand what it all means. First...

Initiating

Notice the word at the *beginning* of Jesus instructions in Matthew 28: it's the word **"go."** Go is an initiating type of word. If I say to you "go!" it's obvious that I'm wanting you to *do* something. You need to take some type of *action*, and usually, *fast*. And that's true of discipleship: it requires *action* and *initiative*. Now, I mention that because some people think that discipleship just sort of *happens*. *Have you ever heard somebody who follows Jesus describe discipleship as just "doing life together"?* I think we've probably even used that language before around here. And it's not a *bad* phrase (it is kind of an odd phrase because what *else* would we be doing together?) but it's not *bad*.

But I think **if we don't define that** phrase, it can be a little **misleading**. Because that sort of makes it sound like discipleship just happens *automatically*. Like it doesn't require any effort or intentionality, other than *physically being in the same place* as other people. And nothing could be further from the truth. Because true discipleship *does* require effort and intentionality. It takes seeking people out and taking the initiative to help them become more like Jesus. *Seeing* it as your *responsibility* to do so.

And I think it **helps if the other person knows** that's what you're trying to do. *So sometimes it helps to say to the other person, something like "hey, I'd love to help you become more like Jesus—are you game for that?"* **Too many times in my life,** I have *incorrectly* assumed that just because someone claims to follow Jesus, or is at church, or is in a LifeGroup with me, that they *want* other people to help them become more like Jesus. And while that arguably *should* be the case, it isn't always. So sometimes it helps

to communicate that up front, and verify that they're wanting that. Discipleship means *initiating*. It's an *initiated* relationship. And that relationship *consists of*, first...

Loving (the other person)

Discipleship should include *loving* the person you are discipling. Now keep in mind that **biblically, love is not** a *feeling*, like we often think of it. Loving the other person doesn't mean you need to conjure up warm, fuzzy feelings about them, or even that you need to make *them* feel warm and fuzzy. Love, biblically, is putting the good of the other person ahead of ourselves. I think of Jesus in the gospel of John saying "**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for their friends.**" Love to Jesus is not so much a feeling as it is a posture of *sacrifice* towards the other person.

And if love is laying down your *life* for the other person, **surely it also includes** laying down some of your *schedule*. Your *time*. Your *preferences*. Your *money*—it involves meeting *practical needs* that person has if and when they come up. Discipleship at its core is an *investment* in the good of the other person, which means it looks like lovingly *sacrificing* for the people you disciple. So this is a very small example, but most of you guys know I am an **introvert** to the core. *This* environment I actually don't mind, but if you ever see me at a wedding or a get-together at someone's house, chances are I am *terribly* uncomfortable. I love people, I love being *around* people...but I have to mentally and emotionally *recover* from being around people. Some of y'all are with me.

And because of that, **if I had things my way,** I would spend my lunch break every day eating by myself in my office. And I'd probably spend most nights just reading by myself until I fall asleep. Some of you are like "wow, that's really sad." It's really not; it's *exhilarating*. It's *incredible*. *Time of my life*, actually. That would be my *preference* of how to spend my time. But understanding that I am called to help make disciples means my lunch breaks and a lot of my evenings get leveraged to spend time with people that I want to help become more like Jesus. And that's not a *big* sacrifice by any means, but it is an example of how making disciples means our *preferences* sometimes get set aside for the good of other people.

And, here's the thing: *loving* the other person is a way to let the other person know **they aren't just a project** to you, but rather a *person*. Your goal isn't just to move them along through a *process*, but rather to care for them, provide for them, and then help them be everything God made them to be. And that's why you're willing to *sacrifice* to see that happen. Discipleship includes *loving* the other person. It also includes...

Teaching

This one is also explicitly mentioned In Matthew 28. And it's **no small command** when it gets mentioned. He says, "*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them everything.*" **Everything.** Everything is a lot of things, last I checked. We are instructed to *invest* in people until they have learned *everything* there is to know about following Jesus. Until they've learned how the good news of Jesus impacts every single *facet* of their life.

Now, maybe **upon hearing that, you're thinking**, "see...this is why I can't disciple people: I don't know *everything* about following Jesus." Maybe *you're* thinking, "sometimes I don't feel like I know much *at all* about following Jesus." And I get that. But you've got to keep reading in the passage: **it doesn't say we are to teach everything we know. It says we are to teach everything God has commanded.** In other words, our source for disciple-making isn't in *here*, but rather in *here*. **So you're not limited by what you don't know yet. You're only limited by your willingness to spend time reading and understanding this book.** Make sense?

And I'll just add to that, we live in the **age of the internet.** There is a *wealth* of information and resources out there to help you *learn* what the Scriptures say and teach. Podcasts, videos, sermons, blog posts. I mentioned this to someone the other day and they were like "...and *Tik Tok!*" And there are theologians on Tik Tok, to be sure. If I were you, I might steer clear of most of them. I've watched a few of them...*not great.* Tik Tok is great for dance videos, but maybe leave the bible teaching alone on there. Just a suggestion.

But my *point* is that there are **resources everywhere.** If you don't know where to look, come ask us: we'd *love* to point you in the right direction. If you don't know where to go, you could even just start with *our* website. On citychurchknox.com, there are almost *five years* worth of teachings on a variety of topics and books from the bible. You could start there. But there are all sorts of resources and help out there to help you learn and then *teach* "everything God has commanded." And that's a key part of discipleship: *teaching.* *Another* part of *discipleship* that goes along with that is...

Modeling

(Not like GQ-type modeling, but modeling *what the life of a follower of Jesus looks like.*) **Remember,** at the very beginning we talked about how discipleship is much like **apprenticeship.** So the goal isn't just to impart *information* to the other person about following Jesus; it's also to show them what following Jesus *looks like in practice.* Part of my story is that I grew up around the Church, I was there every time the doors were open. I heard sermons and teachings week in and week out about the bible. But it wasn't

until I got to college and met a group of guys my age who followed Jesus that I decided to follow Jesus myself. And I think the *reason that* was when it happened, is because I got to see in *them* what following Jesus looked like. What it looked and felt like at a real-life sort level.

So the person you're discipling **needs to see—not just hear, but see**—what it looks like to follow Jesus in you. They need to see how you interact with your roommates. How you love your spouse. How you treat your kids. How you handle your finances. How you think about your sexuality. How you manage your schedule. What you prioritize and what you don't. **They don't just need information about following Jesus; they need a living, breathing example of what it looks like.**

And they need to see **how you do all of that**. Listen, I love so much that a lot of you **bring friends of yours here** to the Gathering on Sunday. And I hope it's helpful to them to be here. But at the end of the day, I can't disciple your friends through a Gathering or a teaching, because I don't *know* them. I don't have a glimpse into their life and most of them don't have a glimpse into mine. But *you* do have a glimpse into their life, and they have a glimpse into yours. And if we can tap into that, discipleship can start to happen. People can become more like Jesus. Not just by hearing things *taught* or *proclaimed*, but *modeled* before their very eyes. Discipleship looks like *modeling* what a life with Jesus looks like. And *finally*, discipleship looks like...

Correcting

This one is obviously the **least fun to talk about** for most people, but part of discipleship is noticing when things are off in the other person's life, and talking to them about it. ~~For~~ instance, when the way they think about *work* is inconsistent with following Jesus, you help them see that, and then help them correct it. When the way they think about *money* is off, you help them see and correct that. When the way they approach *relationships* or *sexuality* is off, you help them see and correct it. Part of helping someone become like Jesus is helping them align and *realign* every aspect of their life with the way of Jesus.

Now **again, this one requires overlapping** your life with theirs on a semi-regular basis. If all you do is get together occasionally with them for coffee, it's going to be pretty hard for you to know what, if anything, they need to be corrected on. Even if the only time you see them is at your *LifeGroup meeting* once a week, it's going to be hard to know from that either. **In order to know when and if they need correcting, you need semi-regular glimpses into their life.** You need to see them in their everyday settings to know how they *really* live—not just how they *tell you* they live.

Now **sometimes, people think** *correcting* someone is in *conflict* with *loving* them. People will say things like, “we shouldn’t try to *change* people; we’re just supposed to *love* people.” And I think the *implication* there is that loving people and wanting people to change are mutually exclusive. But I don’t think that’s true. For instance, if a person was wrestling with *substance addiction*, isn’t it *loving* for you to want them to put that addiction *behind* them? If someone’s life decisions were leading them to anxiety or depression or extreme isolation from others, isn’t it *loving* to want them to make better decisions for their own good?

So sometimes, loving someone actually *looks like wanting* them to change...for *their own* good, and the good of those around them. The *key* is simply this: **it should be that your love for them motivates them wanting to change, not that your love for them is contingent upon them changing.** *That’s* the kicker. *That’s* gospel friendship. *That’s* true, Jesus-like discipleship. *That’s* participating in correction so that you can help people become more of who they were made to be.

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So **there’s our definition**, *defined*. Discipleship is **an initiated relationship that consists of loving, teaching, modeling, and correcting, in order to help the other person become more like Jesus.** Now, maybe you’re taking all that in and thinking “**that’s a lot.**” And you’re not wrong about that: taking the initiative to help others become more like Jesus is a big responsibility. And no doubt the disciples felt like it was a lot *too*, especially given that some of them were still wrestling with what *they* believed about Jesus *themselves*.

But that is part of **why Jesus ends this passage** the way he ends it in Matthew 28. “Go and make disciples,” he says. “Baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything I’ve commanded you.” But *then* he says, “*and behold...* I am *with you always*, even to the very end of the age.” I need you to hear this: **God does not leave his people on their own to make disciples. He sends the Spirit of God to fill them, empower them, lead them and guide them every single step of the way.** When you go out to make disciples, you *never—not even once*—go alone. You have the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead going *with* you. That is the promise of all promises right there. The Spirit will go with us to help us make disciples.

And that’s true in a few *different* ways. The Spirit will *help* you **by pointing you to** and reminding you *of* things in the Scriptures. Jesus says in John 14 that the Spirit will “teach [us] all things and will *remind* [us] of everything he has said to us.” He’ll help us *in the moment*, by giving us words to say. Jesus says in **Matthew 10** that when we find ourselves in **high-pressure** type situations, that we don’t have to be anxious about what to say in those moments, because the Spirit will *tell us* what to say and will speak *through us*” in those moments.

And lastly, God will give us other *followers of Jesus filled with the Spirit* who can offer wisdom and encouragement from the Scriptures along the way. In fact, let me just tell you right now: if you went up to your LifeGroup leader today and said “I’d like to help make disciples in our LifeGroup,” your LifeGroup leader would *jump for joy*. They might cry *tears of joy*. They would *love* to have your help, and they would probably love few things more than to help you learn how to do that well. If you came up to one of our pastors and said “I’d like to learn how to make disciples,” we would be *overjoyed* to help you learn how to do that. That is quite *literally our job* as pastors: to equip you to make disciples. That is *what we’re here to do*. So please, utilize us in that way. But the Holy Spirit is available to you in and through other followers of Jesus.

So in all those ways and more, know that **when you go to make disciples, you do not go alone**. The Spirit of God, in a multitude of different ways, goes before you and with you and works through you. So I’ll close, like Jesus did, by saying this:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. Now go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that he has commanded us. And behold, he is with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Let’s pray.