

Discipleship

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"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19,20).

This command was given to the eleven disciples just before Jesus ascended to heaven after His resurrection, and is often referred to as "The Great Commission." It is full of direction. It forms the framework of how the Lord is laboring to bring His purposes to completion in our day.

We want to look at this command carefully, with the purpose in mind of seeing more clearly how the Lord is working to bring many sons to glory, so that we all may give ourselves more fully and effectively to the work of God in the short time God has given us. There is coming a day when we must stand before our Lord and give an account to Him, and none of us wants to stand empty-handed in that day. May the Lord give us ears to hear Him, and may He apply to our eyes the "eye salve" that we all need in order to see, for the labor is great and we dare not miss the way.

Make Disciples

The first thing we notice in this command of our Lord is that He told His disciples to go and make disciples. Have we considered what it means to make a disciple? What is a disciple? *"It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher"* (Matthew 10:25). *"He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked"* (I John 2:6). *"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect"* (Matthew 5:48). *"...that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish"* (Ephesians 5:27). The thought in all of these scriptures is that every person who names the name of the Lord should be brought to a place of maturity, in which he is walking in all aspects of life just as Jesus did. God's purpose is full-grown, mature, responsible sons--not babies. We all begin as babes, but a baby that remains a baby is no joy to anyone.

What does this mean to us? It means that our revelation of God's purpose must include His plan for bringing every son to maturity. Do parents rest when a baby is born into this world? The labor has only begun! And if we use the natural as an example, we can say that the labor of bringing a son to maturity far exceeds that of producing a baby. Of course we cannot ignore the beginning, because if a person has not been born of the Spirit, he is not a son. God is training sons, and we must first know that we have been born into the family of God. Jesus said that we cannot even see what God is doing unless we have been born of the Spirit (John 3). But to be born of the Spirit and partake of the life of God is only the beginning, not the end.

When we are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ, we are made alive to God so that we can be led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14). Apart from this baptism into God to which Matthew 28:19 refers, we are not even in the kingdom of God, or His family. If you are not yet sure that you are a son or daughter, you need to settle this question with God. The Holy Spirit is faithful, and he will show you where you need to respond to God.

Training is demanding, and if we are to benefit to the fullest extent from God's training in our lives, our relationship with God must be right from the very beginning. We cannot begin the race halfheartedly,

not knowing for sure that we have submitted completely to His authority. A natural example from the military may help to illustrate this. When a man enlists in military service, he is taken to basic training which is often very rigorous and seemingly unreasonable at times. The purpose of this is to find out quickly whether he really wants to be in the military, and whether he is able to take the instruction and training that will be necessary to make him able to bear responsibility. Many fail at this point, and turn back. In one sense, it seems cruel and heartless.

Why do those who are doing the training do this? Because they know what is ahead. They know from experience that if a man is not able to stand this initial discipline, he will not be willing to bear the greater discipline that is soon to come. More importantly, the discipline reveals character flaws in a man which could eventually cost his or another man's life in a time of crisis. Commanders must know that their men are willing to take instruction. They want men who are fully committed. They want men that see a goal and are willing to sell all to obtain it. War, to the natural man, is ultimate commitment, even to death. There can be no flaw in the foundation.

If this is true in the natural, how much more it is true in the spiritual. The cost of halfhearted commitment in the natural is physical death, but the cost of halfhearted commitment in the spiritual is spiritual death. This is why Jesus said that if a man is not willing to forsake all, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple (Luke 14:33). It seems so hard, but Jesus is for us, not against us. Anything less than 100 percent commitment will leave a place of weakness where the enemy can touch us. Jesus never tried to trick men into following Him by hiding the cost. He laid it out in full force and told men to think it over carefully before they said yes. He told the rich young ruler to sell all, and when the man went away, He did not go after him and soften the demand.

What is the pure relationship that we must have at the beginning? It is very simple. Jesus must be Lord. We must be willing to come under His authority. I must lay down my will and any rights that I think I have, and do His will. It must be complete, willing submission to my head, Christ. Anything less than this is not salvation. There is no such thing as being saved without Christ being Lord. He cannot save us if He is not our Lord. Religious men try to divide these to their own destruction. Being a disciple and being a Christian are one and the same. The disciples were first called Christians because men recognized that they were like Christ. If we have submitted to Christ as Lord, He will conform us to His image. If we are not walking as He walked, then we are not under His authority, and we are not disciples.

If you find yourself lacking at this point, there is only one answer, and that is repentance. Turn from self-will and independence, and yield yourself to Christ. Secure the foundational relationship with unreserved abandonment to Christ as Lord. Lay every right you thought you had at His feet, and do His will. He is there to receive each one of us and bring us into His family and under His training. With this wonderful, eternal relationship established, we can begin as disciples. We are ready for our training to begin.

Training

The command of our Lord is *"teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you"* (Matthew 28:20). What does it mean to teach? Many times we have the idea that teaching is speaking to people about a subject and then leaving them alone. But consider the normal teaching method in a school classroom. Is the teacher finished when a lecture has been delivered? Has the student been taught when he has listened to the lecture? We know the answer is "no" in the ordinary school setting with which we are all familiar. Delivering the lecture is usually only the beginning. In that lecture, instruction or direction is given which must then be applied. Homework is given which requires the student to use what has been presented. Students are then held accountable for the assignment by means of a test or recitation of some kind. They must show they have learned what has been presented before they can say they have been "taught."

How many of these principles can we say we are applying in our spiritual teaching or training? I think most of us will have to admit we have concentrated on the first part, the presentation or instruction, and have neglected the applied work and accountability. There may be many reasons for this, and we will discuss some of these reasons, but the end result is that we have not learned--and not only that, but we have wearied both teacher and student by presenting the same instruction over and over again with no progress in learning.

If we will consider how the Lord Jesus taught, we will see that He did not just preach sermons. He was among the people--involved in their lives. He took the disciples with Him into every situation. He gave them assignments, and He held them accountable for what they did. He corrected them and answered their questions, which came up in real life situations. It was full, complete training in every sense of the word. Why have we not done the same? Let us consider some of the reasons.

Example

The subject that we are addressing is not head knowledge which may be learned in a classroom, but life relationship with God. The first requirement in this kind of training is that of example. We must be able to say *"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern"* (Philippians 3:17). The apostle Paul did not hesitate to say this. He boldly referred to his example among believers as a reason for listening to what he had to say to them (I Thessalonians 1:5, 2:1-12). If we are going to make disciples, then we must also be able to say with Christ, *"It is enough that a disciple be as his master."* What is the beginning place in our lives which gives authority to our teaching? Is it not that we are living what we are saying? If we are not living what we are trying to teach, can we think that anybody will take us seriously? Others may listen politely, at least for a while, but will they act on our words of instruction?

Those of us who teach, speaking *"as an oracle of God"* (I Peter 4:11), must be ruthlessly honest at this point. Have we allowed the Holy Spirit to plumb the depths of our hearts and show us ourselves? Does our life speak, even if we never say a word? Can men look at our lives and see a "disciple"? This is not the conclusion by any means, for we do not just copy one another. But this is the foundation in the life of a teacher--one who is interested in making disciples. We must be disciples, to make disciples, and there is no detour around this requirement. If we expect others to forsake the world, we must have forsaken the world. If we expect others to be diligent, we must be diligent. If we expect others to be on time, we must be on time. We must set the example, and if we do nothing more than set an example, we will have done a great deal.

Setting an example is something that every one of us can do. Teachers should be foremost, but the power of many disciples setting an example cannot be overstated. Others watch us all the time. The world watches to see if there is any reality in our lives. We watch each other all the time. Are we as exacting with ourselves as we are with our brothers and sisters? We should be much more demanding of ourselves than of others. Remember, we can only obey for ourselves.

Involvement

There is one thing we can say about the Lord Jesus. He was involved in the lives of those He was seeking to reach. First, He was involved in the lives of the twelve disciples. He chose these men to be with Him. He took them into every situation. He did not just tell them what to do; He showed them. They were with Him as He faced every problem. They saw Him pray. They saw Him deal with the Pharisees. He laid down His life for these men. He questioned them and answered their questions. He put responsibility on them and required an answer. He did not hold Himself aloof, but washed their feet and served them in every way. They needed more than this, as their experience at Calvary revealed, but Jesus poured His life into these men even before Calvary. Have we carefully considered how our Lord taught these men?

Secondly, Christ was involved in the lives of people. He went to their weddings and feasts. He taught in their temples. He ate in their houses and walked their streets. He had no house of His own, but gave up every comfort and convenience to be with the people He wanted to reach. He "lost His life," so to speak. He was willing to be with people all day and then spend the night in prayer. He was willing to go to a house when asked to meet a need. He was in the middle of a crowd, but even there He was sensitive to needs along the way. He was busy, but not too busy to ask the children to come sit on His knee.

What we are saying is that this was no classroom training. This was training in real life with real people who had real needs. To use the modern term, it was "hands-on training." Making disciples cannot be done without this type of involvement. If those of us whom God has called to be teachers are not involved in the lives of our students, we will never be able to make disciples. The subjects we are called to teach cannot be communicated by intellectual instruction.

Thirdly, we can say that those who benefited from the teaching that Christ was able to give were those who opened up their lives to involvement. Jesus did not go to every house--only where He was invited. He did not meet every need--only the needs of those who came to Him. Those who did come had to press past many hindrances, but their diligence was rewarded. Christ was willing to be involved, but the people had to open the door of their lives. Involvement goes two ways, and without both, it will not be the involvement that profits. Have we opened our lives to God's servants? Have we invited them into our homes and our lives? Have we stated our needs and asked for help? Jesus said that those who ask will receive. It is easy to sit in the lecture hall and listen to instruction; it takes boldness to come out of hiding and begin to ask questions. If we are not willing to humble ourselves and begin to ask for help, our needs will not be met. Can I admit I need help? Am I willing for others to be involved in my life? If not, I can never be a disciple.

Discipline

The very word "disciple" brings the idea of discipline to our mind. Discipline lies at the heart of strength. A disciplined person is able to endure where an undisciplined person falls. Discipline cuts away things that rob strength, and straightens the walk toward the goal. Discipline exercises to increase endurance. God is working to discipline every area of our lives so that we may be able to finish the race that is before us.

Discipline is a broad term, and sometimes when we think of discipline we think of punishment. But strong corrective measures are only a very small part of discipline. Discipline is stringent exercise with a specific goal in mind. One who submits to discipline to run a race runs every day to the limit of his endurance, then runs more to "stretch" himself. A person may discipline his or her time, cutting out nonessentials, to be able to finish school, or begin a business, or work to pay off a debt. The military disciplines a soldier to be able to endure hardship, leaving the soft life behind and strengthening physical and mental skills to be able to withstand the ordeal of combat. The disciplined army is the army that wins.

Discipline is not easy. Running the extra mile when it seems like one cannot run another step is painful. Working one more problem in school when friends are calling to go for a walk takes strength of character and a clear goal in mind. Changing a lifestyle or job to be more available to God and His purposes does not come without effort. Seeing that our desires are completely under the control of the Holy Spirit is not a simple matter. The question is, are we willing to submit to the discipline of God?

A father who loves his children is constantly leading them on to a greater level of discipline. He curtails play, assigns work, increases responsibility, and holds them accountable to it. He has a goal in mind: mature, disciplined sons and daughters, able to bear responsibility in a job or family of their own. He knows that life holds many trials and dangers, and he seeks to prepare them. He does not make things easy, but constantly works to increase his children's abilities in every area.

If earthly fathers, limited in love, wisdom, and ability, seek to do this, how much more does our heavenly Father discipline His own sons and daughters out of love (Hebrews 12). Our heavenly Father has eternal goals in mind, and He knows the future for each one of us. He is preparing us to stand victorious in the power of His life. He does not bring any unnecessary discipline into our lives, but only that which is needful. He is for us, not against us. He has called us to walk the straight and narrow way. Anything He takes out of our lives is with His purposes and our good in mind. He is a good Father, and He does all things well.

To be disciples, we must submit to His discipline. We each have a choice. We can choose to submit or we can rebel. If we submit, we will find that our spiritual strength will increase. We will be able to bear more, and we will be useful to our Father. We will find ourselves ready to handle what comes our way, because our Father has prepared us for what He knew was coming. If we rebel, saying (by words or actions) that it is all too hard and we would rather do our own will, we will be easy prey for the enemy, and deception will soon overtake us. If we want to be disciples, we cannot look for the easy road.

Accountability

An essential element of training is accountability. Have you ever seen a successful school which did not require the student to show that he had learned the subject? Accountability may be in the form of an exam, completion of a project, a presentation to others, or may take many other forms. But the essential element in all is the same. The student must show responsibility. He must show that he is learning. This accountability is for the student's own good. He or she entered the school and willingly submitted to its requirements, with the stated purpose and desire of learning. In order to learn, the work assigned must be done. What is there to be gained by not doing the work? It is a waste of time and money for both student and teacher if learning does not take place. A serious student welcomes a place of accountability and will even demand it. He wants to know whether or not he is learning.

These things may be obvious in the natural domain, but how do they apply in the spiritual? For us to be able to make application, there is one area we need to review. Whom did Jesus tell to make disciples? Was it men or angels? *"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:11,12). Perhaps we would have chosen angels to do the work, but God gives grace to men. This is His choice, His plan, and He always does things in perfection. No matter how many problems it seems to present to us, our place is not to change God's plan, but to understand it and walk in it. If we obey God, He will see to it that our needs are met--He is God.

The reason we have trouble making application of what we know to be good teaching is that we view men separate from God. But when we are brought into union with Christ, we are not separate from God. We are one with God, and we are living His life. God always moves from this position. When He puts demands upon us, it is always with the understanding that we are in union with Him, and He expects us to draw upon that union for the grace to meet every situation. Union with God lifts us out of the natural into the spiritual. We are no longer dealing with just man, but God indwelling every member of the body of Christ. Instruction that is coming to us is coming from Christ. Every teacher is instructed to speak *"as an oracle of God."* The teaching then is not natural but spiritual. It is the word of God to meet the need of the moment. It is light upon the pathway. It is coming from the Lord, and the human vessel is but a channel that God has chosen to use. This takes spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear.

The student (the hearer) must also be in union with God to be able to discern the word of instruction coming to meet the need. The Holy Spirit in the heart of every member gives the anointing to be able to teach and recognize. Without this anointing, we will not recognize teaching as coming from the Lord, and the results (if any) will only be natural. In other words, we will not be left with God.

Accountability, then, must have these two elements working. That is, the teacher must be speaking the word of God, and the student (hearer) must recognize the word of God. In other words, we must know that God is speaking to us. As good students, those desiring to learn and grow, we should desire to be held accountable for what God is speaking to us, even more than the natural student does. We want to be *"doers of the Word, and not hearers only,"* deceiving ourselves (James 1:22). After all, we do want to make progress in our training, don't we? If we do, we should not have any trouble willingly submitting to that accountability.

How does this work out? If I know what God is speaking to me, then in that word is a place of obedience. Here is where my brothers and sisters can help me. Can I tell them what God is speaking to me? Do I desire their prayers? Can I ask them to help hold that word before me? Can I ask them to care for me? Am I afraid of being held accountable for the word of God to me? If so, why? If God is at the

very center of that accountability, it will remove all fear, and faith can walk in this place. Love expresses itself in care, and perfect love casts out all fear. I am my brother's keeper and he is mine. Do I believe that?

What does it mean to be held accountable? As parents, how do we hold our children accountable? We give a place of instruction in an area that requires obedience. Then as watchful parents, we see that this new place of obedience is acted upon. We give reminders. We call attention to a place of forgetfulness. We encourage. Normally, if our relationship with our children is proper, this is all that is required to see a new area established.

If our relationship with our heavenly Father is proper, should this also not be the normal pattern? Let us use a specific example to make this clear. Suppose that I see I have not been watchful when giving a command to my children, to see that it is carried out. In some way, the Lord brings this to my attention. But because of insensitivity and lack of discipline, I am not accustomed to seeing that my word is carried out. Here is where my brothers and sisters in the Lord can hold me accountable. I tell them of this area that I am desiring to see strengthened, and ask them to help me by calling it to my attention if I do not follow through on my commands to my children. This example would be particularly applicable to husbands and wives. Should we not welcome this kind of help from each other?

A very important aspect in all of this is that we want help from our brothers and sisters. If we have hearts of humility, this should not bother us. We want to make progress in God, do we not? Why not go to brothers and sisters and ask for help? This is not forced, but comes from a heart filled with God's love. Perhaps we have had failures in the past where we felt pressured, or felt that others came into our lives in a wrong way. We cannot stay in this place forever or we will die. We need to forgive, get our eyes back on Jesus, allow Him to fill our hearts with God's love, and move on. We should learn from the mistakes, but we cannot allow the mistakes to keep us down. We may have been knocked down, but if we are drawing from God, we will not be knocked out. God has chosen to use men, imperfect though they may seem to us. Let us rise with faith in what God can do, and humble ourselves under His mighty hand. He has said that if we will, He will lift us up, and He will never fail us.

The Grace That Teaches Us

In what are we to be disciplined or held accountable? *"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you"* (Titus 2:11-15).

How has the grace of God appeared to us? Is it only in our prayer closets or when we are reading the Scriptures? These are important, but we are told that grace has been given to every member (Romans 12). Some have been given more grace, and that grace is given that they might serve every other member with Christ. The grace is given to teach us. We need this grace, to come to maturity. This grace gives some members the ability to see beyond the place we can see. They in turn will serve us so we can see for ourselves. A word of wisdom, a word of knowledge, and a word of faith are all important in giving us the ability to move, and most of the time it will come through other members in our time of need. God's purpose is to bind us together as one, and this is part of the way He is working that purpose.

If we read the Scripture above, we can see the areas in which we should expect that grace to teach us. When another member points out an area in our lives that is not according to godliness, if we are lovers of truth we will take the encouragement very carefully before God. Another member may make a mistake in the way he or she comes to us, or the manner of expression may be immature, but we should never reject something immediately. We need to receive one another and prayerfully consider what is being said to us, even if it is not said in just the way we think it should be.

Notice the strong words in verse 15: *"rebuke with all authority."* This is not the greatest part of the outworking, but it may come like this from time to time. Even if we are rebuked, can we see the love of God behind that rebuke? Can we see the care? Remember, the grace given to men is for our teaching. Paul told the Corinthians that the grace given to him was for their good, and his desire was that it would not be in vain. It could be in vain if they allowed themselves to remain closed to him. His admonition was that they be reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5:20). Then they would be able to hear God through Paul and the grace would profit them.

The Presence of God

"...And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). How is discipleship lifted out of the natural into the spiritual? The answer is in this statement of Jesus. *"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you"* (John 14:16-18). *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"* (John 14:23). When Christ ascended into Heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to abide forever. The Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost, and He has been here ever since to bring the Father and Son within each believer.

Men have seen the demands of discipleship, and have often tried to work out the principles of which we have been speaking, apart from the Holy Spirit. The end result does not leave men with God but only with men. The principles are right, but they must be worked in the power of the Spirit with God in control. There is *"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"* (I Timothy 2:5). None of us can stand between another man and God. The one essential key in all of this is that we must be led by the Spirit. No man can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3).

If any one of us is working in the life of another, for it to profit, it must be under the control of the Holy Spirit. If any one of us is to profit from that which is coming through another brother or sister, we must recognize the Holy Spirit behind it and respond to God. If we are not alive to God, we will move in our own strength, and there will not be spiritual fruit. This puts a demand on each one of us to be abiding in Jesus. This is a continual dwelling, a relationship which must be maintained. If we maintain that relationship, we will recognize that God is using men in our lives, and our submission will not be unto men but unto God. We will see that discipline is for our own good and welcome it. An attitude of humility, seeing that we are dependent on God, and bound together in one body, as one family with our brothers and sisters, will allow us to receive the grace of God which will work in our lives.

Am I a disciple? Am I under the discipline and training of God? Do I see the grace of God coming to me through my brothers and sisters? Am I benefiting from it? Am I obeying, seeing weak areas strengthened? Am I being changed from the inside out? Is there growth? Am I moving under the control of the Spirit? All of these elements and more are to be found in discipleship. If we can answer "yes" to all these points, and they are increasing, then we can have confidence even as Peter had. Listen

to his exhortation again.

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 1:5-11).