

Discipleship Defined

Matthew 28:16-20

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Recently Beth and I spent time going through some boxes in our basement. I came across a number of prayer journals I've recorded over the years. As I was flipping through one from 2004, I found something I wrote on the inside cover.

Q: To Megan (our youngest, who was 5 years old at the time): *"How does it feel to be a new Christian?"*

A: After hesitating, Megan replied, *"What's a new Christian supposed to do, daddy?"*

Seeing that question again stirred up some thoughts I've had as a father and a pastor over the years. *What's a new Christian supposed to do? Are there some things we must do in order to grow?* This ties right into our second "G" – Gather, Grow, Give and Go with the gospel.

Last weekend we learned from Philippians 3 that *if you want to grow, you must let some things go*. We'll see today that *as we grow, we'll go global with the good news*. Our purpose is to define discipleship as Jesus does: *A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him*.

The first step is for each of us to lovingly follow Jesus and then to intentionally help others do the same. When Jesus called some fishermen in Matthew 4:19, He also gave them their purpose: ***"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."*** We're to grow and bring others along with us. 2 Timothy 2:2 says: ***"And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."*** A devoted disciple discipled other disciples who in turn discipled more disciples.

In our new series called, *"Discipleship Matters"* we're going to wrestle with the discipleship demands of Jesus from the Gospels. In preparation I read each of the four Gospels and simply put the letter "D" in the margin next to the verses that deal with the call and cost of discipleship. Take a guess how many times in the gospels that Jesus clarified His call for disciples to follow Him fully. Right, 104 times!

Our text today is Matthew 28:18-20 but before we get there, let's set the context. After Jesus was raised from the dead, He appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Later, He showed up to Peter and then to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. That evening he appeared to most of the disciples and finally, to Thomas.

Shortly after this, we read in verses 16-17: ***“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw Him they worshiped Him, but some doubted.”***

We learn three key truths from these verses.

1. Obedience is always the expectation. Even though the resurrection happened in Jerusalem, Jesus directed the disciples to meet Him on a mountain in Galilee, a journey of 90 miles. We see this in Matthew 26:32: ***“But after I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee.”***

This was a challenging and difficult trip, but the disciples didn't hesitate. In a similar way, we must always strive for immediate obedience, no matter how hard it is.

Don't miss this. If the disciples wanted to see Jesus again, they had to go to Galilee. Because the disciples obeyed Jesus, they put themselves in position to hear Him make a monumental statement. Listen. We'll never know the person of Jesus and we won't know His plans if we're not obedient. Obedience is the key to fulfilling God's plans for our lives.

2. The right response is always reverence. When the disciples see Jesus, they hit the dirt in worship. The idea behind this word for worship is they prostrated themselves in praise, much like they did in Matthew 14:33 after watching Jesus walk on the water: ***“And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”***

3. Your doubts don't disqualify you. The word for ***“doubt”*** means, ***“to be divided in half, uncertain, wavering in hesitation.”*** It was used of a person standing where two ways meet, resulting in indecision. I find it fascinating that Jesus doesn't rebuke them for their doubts, nor does He reject the worship of those who revered Him. While some found great delight in Him, others doubted Him. Most of them were focused and faithful but some were filled with fear. We're a lot like that, aren't we? Sometimes we're devoted and other times we doubt.

The Great Commission

Before we unpack the passage known as the Great Commission, I want to share the stunning results of a recent Barna study.

- When asked if churchgoers had “heard of the Great Commission,” 51% said they did not recognize this term.
- 25% said they have heard of the “Great Commission” but don’t know what it means.
- Sadly, 76% of those who go to church have no clue what the Great Commission is all about.
- Sadly, only 17% have heard of the Great Commission and know what it means.

To be clear, the Great Commission is found in all four gospels but for our purposes we’ll be in Matthew 28:18-20. These words come as a direct command from Christ: ***“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”***

I see three main points that will propel us to participate in His mission.

1. Be convinced of the full authority of Jesus. We see this in verse 18: ***“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’”*** I love that Jesus drew near to the doubters. Before giving them an assignment, Jesus made sure they knew He had the authority to do so. The word **“all”** refers to **“totality”** and **“authority”** speaks of power. Jesus has the right and the might to do whatever He decides to do. We see this in John 3:35: ***“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.”***

This is a good spot to ask whether you’ve given Jesus first place in your life. Is He prominent or is He preeminent? Do you label Him as your Lord but live your life only according to what you like?

In his book called, *Multiply*, Francis Chan writes: *“Imagine Jesus walking up to the first disciples and saying something like this, ‘Hey, would you guys mind identifying yourselves with Me in some way? Don’t worry. I don’t actually care if*

you do anything I do or that you change your lifestyle at all. I'm just looking for people who are willing to say they believe in Me and call themselves Christians.'" Chan adds, *"The call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is open to everyone, but we don't get to write our own job description. If Jesus is Lord, then He sets the agenda."*

Jesus has all authority, He's in charge and He's in control. The number one requirement in fulfilling the Great Commission is to make sure *you* are following Jesus as a devoted follower. That's the first part of our definition: *"A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus..."* Now, let's move to the second half: *"...and intentionally helps others follow Him."*

2. Be committed to follow the assignment of Jesus. Once we've submitted to His authority, we're ready to receive His assignment as found in verses 19-20a: ***"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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."***

Remember He gives this commission to make disciples to doubters. That actually makes me feel good. Jesus is saying something like this, *"Go and make disciples and in your going, your doubts will disappear."*

As Jesus hovers between heaven and earth, He has one last thing to say to His followers. This is not a suggestion or an option, though for many of us, we could call it the "Great Omission." Let's unpack this passage phrase-by-phrase.

"Go..." This participle literally means, *"to transport one's self; to go from one place to another"* or *"in your going."* In other words, we are to make disciples in the natural course of our lives, wherever we go. To go is a given – as we go, and we will go, this is what we should do. We must move and not stand still! We're to be active, not inert. After all, the first two letters of "Gospel" are "G-O."

Because God is a going God, going means crossing boundaries – going across the street, going to have dinner with an unbeliever, going to the west end, going beyond one's comfort zone, and going cross-culturally to another country.

"Therefore..." Because of His authority, Jesus has the right to reign supreme and to give commands to His charges. Everything He says, and all that we have been given to do, is based upon His universal and unquestioned Lordship.

“Make disciples...” While I make it my practice to study the original Hebrew and Greek words in my preaching prep, I seldom pronounce the words in the original language. But I think it’s helpful here. *Didaskalos* means teacher and *mathetes* means pupil, or disciple. It was impossible for a *didaskalos* to be a teacher unless he had *mathetes*, disciples. It was equally impossible to be a *mathetes* (disciple), unless you had a *didaskalos* (teacher). It was the relationship between pupil and teacher that was the essence of discipleship. Discipleship is all about relationship.

A disciple is literally a “*learner*,” one who is being mentored by the Master. It also denotes “*one who follows another’s teaching*.” Thus, a disciple is a life-long learner who lives out what he or she is learning from the teacher. Mark 3:14 says Jesus “***appointed twelve...so that they might be with Him and He might send them out to preach...***” Even today, men and women are His method. We’re called to be with Jesus and then go with the gospel to those who need to hear.

Discipleship is more than getting to know what the teacher knows. It is becoming more like *who* the teacher is. The goal of a disciple is given by Jesus in Luke 6:40: “***A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher***.”

Bill Hull describes a disciple as “*someone whose intention is to follow Jesus and to learn from Him how to live his life as though Jesus were living it*.” Here’s what I wrote down after reading several articles and a couple books on discipleship: “*A disciple loves Jesus, learns from Him, lives out what he learns and leaves a legacy to others*.”

Our commission is more than just evangelism – we must make disciples by equipping, edifying and enfolding new converts into reproducing churches. This is clearly evident in Acts 14:21: “***When they had preached to the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned...***”

There is one main verb, one main command in this passage and that is to “***make disciples***.” We are to *go* in order to make disciples. We are to *baptize* disciples. And we are to *teach* disciples *to obey*.

“Of all nations...” When Jesus first sent out His disciples in Matthew 10:5-6, He told them to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But now He is inaugurating an explicitly worldwide mission. This was not only new and novel to many Jews; it was also abhorrent for them to think about going to pagan lands.

The task of making disciples must extend to the ends of the earth. The word **“nations”** is the Greek *ethne*, where we get the word ethnic and refers to “people groups,” not just countries. Our task is not just to make disciples in the 195 countries of the world; but to go to the over *16,000* distinct people groups scattered across the continents! We’re to make disciples of everyone, everywhere, at all times.

This requires dedicated disciples who will go and others who will stand behind them with their prayers and pocketbooks. John Piper reminds us there are only three responses to the Great Commission: *“Go, send, or disobey.”*

I fear we as American Christians have lost sight of the fact that there are thousands of people dying without Christ every day and waking up in the horrors of Hell. Here’s a question. What percentage of the world’s 7.1 billion people reside in the United States? Less than 5%, and yet we often act like we’re the center of the universe.

Revelation 5:9: **“...and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”** Since there will be believers from every people group in heaven, we must go with the gospel and develop disciples to the ends of the earth.

“Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism is a sign of separation from the world and identification with the triune God, where we pledge allegiance to the Almighty. It’s an outward expression of an inner confession.

Notice we’re to baptize **“in the name,”** not in the **“names.”** Here we see unity and diversity. There is one God eternally existing as three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever gone to a grocery store and seen a can with no label on it? This is a problem because you don’t know what’s inside. If the can has a label that says, “Green Beans,” it’s like that can is saying, *“I want you to know green beans live in me.”* When you’re baptized, you’re putting a label on your life and you want people to know that Jesus Christ is your Lord and He lives inside you!

If you’re born again and not yet baptized, this is your next step. We’ll be scheduling our next baptism in February.

“Teaching them to observe all I have commanded you.” We are not interested in just filling heads; we want filled up hearts and faithful hands and feet that obey. We’re to teach people to ***“observe”*** all that Jesus has commanded, meaning a lifetime of learning and living out what the Lord teaches us. One Greek dictionary explains it as *“persisting in obedience.”*

Martin Luther once said of biblical faith, *“While others are debating whether faith produces works, real faith has already run out into the streets and is at work.”*

Tony Evans says, *“People want salvation but don’t want to put in the time to be strong disciples of Jesus Christ. What many Christians want to do is to audit the Christian life. An audit is where a person goes to class to get information but is not required to do any of the work.”*

Christ came near and they knew Him. Now He tells them to make Him known. Now that we know, we must grow and go so we can make Him known to those who don’t know.

A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him.

3. Be comforted by the faithful assurance of Jesus. Jesus has all authority to give us any assignment He chooses. But this can feel overwhelming. He quickly promises His presence in the last part of verse 20: ***“And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.”*** While Jesus gives what seems like an impossible assignment, He does so with His authority and also with His faithful assurance. Jesus is present with us throughout the entire discipleship process.

Some translations use the word “amen” or “lo” for the word ***“behold.”*** The Greek literally means, *“See, pay close attention, behold, and remember.”*

The phrase ***“I am”*** is emphatic and brings us back to Exodus 3:13 when God referred to Himself, ***“I am who I am.”*** When Moses wonders what he should say to the people when they ask who has sent him, God says, ***“Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”*** In a similar way, we are sent by the great “I Am” and we have the added promise of His presence as we proclaim the gospel. The word ***“with”*** means, *“remaining in the midst of.”* And ***“always”*** means, *“the whole of every day.”*

Matthew began His gospel explaining Immanuel, God with us. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus promises to be with us when we confront someone about sin and here the promise of His presence is tied to witnessing. Jesus is not only with us when we *gather* in His name, but when we *go* in His name. Because we have His assurance to be with us, we can complete His authoritative assignment to go and make disciples. In that sense, we don't go *for* Him, we go *with* Him.

No matter how challenging and difficult the task may seem, remember that the Redeemer is with you. Hold on to His promise found in Matthew 16:18: ***"I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it."***

Ray Pritchard puts it precisely: *"You'll never know if Jesus has the power to help you until you really need His help. You'll never know if Jesus is with you until you decide to go somewhere in His name."*

The entire commission is bookended with Jesus' sovereign power ("all authority) and His eternal presence ("I'll be with you"). This is a blanket promise of the ongoing presence of the Son of God with His people, wherever they go, no matter how far they go, to the very end of the age.

In summary, Jesus is saying something like this...

- *"Be convinced of my full authority."*
- *"Be committed to follow my assignment."*
- *"Be comforted by my faithful assurance."*

Jesus is surely with us, and He will be with us to the very end of the age. We are able, only because He enables. Jesus promised in John 14:8: ***"I will not leave you as orphans..."***

I like what James Montgomery Boice writes, *"We have been given a very great task, but we do not need to attempt it in our own strength. We have the Lord's power at work within us as well as His promise to be with us to the very end as we obey the Great Commission."*

Every time you go with the gospel, every time you strive to live out the Great Commission, every time you have that awkward spiritual conversation, every time you seek to disciple someone, Jesus is there with you, and He'll be with you until the end of the age. You can count on the promise of His presence! *We are never closer to Jesus than when we're doing what He commanded us to do.*

Notice the word “*all*” is used four times in this passage.

- Jesus possesses “*all*” authority
- He sends us to “*all*” nations
- We’re to teach people to obey “*all*” He has commanded
- When we make disciples, He is with us “*always*”

I don’t want discipleship to become a “program” of EBC because discipleship is the purpose of our church. It’s not one of our many ministries; it is *our* ministry mandate. It’s for everyone, not just the pastors, and it must start in our hearts and then be fleshed out in our homes. Parents are called to make disciples of their children and grandparents are called to disciple grandchildren. While decisions for Christ are important, the true metric is how many disciples of Christ we are making.

Our aim is for everyone to be *lovingly following Jesus and intentionally helping others to do the same*. We want you to be discipled by someone and for you to disciple someone.

Closing Questions

1. Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? If you don’t know Jesus yet, it’s time to get saved. Put your faith in Him and then lovingly follow Him for the rest of your life.

2. What one thing will you do to grow in 2021? Here’s a newsflash: “*You will not coast into Christ-likeness.*” According to research, only those who are intentional will actually engage in discipleship. We must not only have faith *in* Jesus, we must faithfully *follow* Him.

If you want 2021 to be different, then decide to go deep. Some of you are saved but you’re not surrendered. Others of you are born again but you’ve not been baptized. What are you waiting for? Join the church and commit to gathering, growing, giving and going with the gospel, all for the glory of God.

3. What is your Bible reading plan for 2021? Studies show reading the Bible is the number one predictor for spiritual growth. If you want to grow, you must get into God’s Word and you must allow God’s Word to get into you – that’s our topic for next weekend. Some of you already have a reading plan in place but if you

don't, I highly recommend the Edgewood plan found on our app and website. We're reading through the Gospel of Matthew this month.

4. What one person will you pour into in 2021? Moses had Joshua, Eli influenced Samuel, Elijah impacted Elisha, Barnabas put his arm around Paul, Priscilla and Aquila discipled Apollos, Paul trained Timothy and Titus, and Jesus discipled the 12 and gave more extensive exhortations to Peter, James and John. D.L. Moody once stated, *"It is better to train ten people than to do the work of ten people. But it is harder."*

The group Jesus poured into was small. It took Him over three years to train 12 people while there were millions in the world at the time. How could a dozen men be expected to reach all nations with the gospel? The answer is found in the principle of multiplication.

Allow me to illustrate. Would you rather have a million dollars every week for a year or one penny for the first week and then double it every week for a year? At the end of the year, option one would yield 52 million dollars, which is a nice sum, but option two would give you over 22 trillion dollars!

Let's take this out of dollars and put it into discipleship. Would it be better to disciple 10 people a year for 30 years or one person every two years, but that person would in turn disciple someone else and that person would disciple someone? Option one would yield 300 disciples over a lifetime but option two would produce 32,768 disciples.

A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him.

William Carey conquered the prevailing indifference and hostility to the Great Commission in his day. At the age of 21, he had mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Italian, and was studying Dutch and French. He was an avid reader and the more he learned, the more convinced he was that *"the peoples of the world need Christ."*

He made notes, and constructed a great leather globe of the world, and one day, in the quietness of his cobbler's shop, Carey wrote these words: *"If it be the duty of all men to believe the Gospel...then it be the duty of those who are entrusted with the Gospel to endeavor to make it known among all nations."* As he broke down and wept, he cried out to the Lord: *"Here am I; send me!"*

To surrender was one thing but to get to the field was another problem because there were no mission agencies and no real missionary interest. When Carey shared his passion and commitment to the Great Commission at a meeting of ministers, one older preacher said, *“Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.”*

Carey became more determined than ever to evangelize and disciple the nations and wrote his famous masterpiece on missions called, *“Enquiry into the Obligations of the Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.”*

He then prayed and pled and plodded and persisted and preached this message: *“Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.”* As a result of this sermon, preached over 220 years ago, the Baptist Missionary Society was begun. One year later Carey went to India and after years of discouragement (there were no converts for seven years), debt, disease, and the deterioration of his wife’s health, Carey persevered because he knew that Jesus was with him until the end of the age.

When he died at 73, he saw the Scriptures translated into 40 different languages, countless people had been converted, he founded a college and an edict was passed prohibiting *sati* (burning widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands).

Let me see if I can finally answer our daughter Megan’s question: *“What’s a new Christian supposed to do, daddy?”* Here it is: *“Lovingly follow Jesus and intentionally help others to do the same.”*

Closing Video: [“The Great Commission”](#)

Communion

The only way we’ll be able to live out Christ’s co-mission is for us to be in common-union with Him. Let’s transition now to communion.

Listen to [Luke 22:19-20](#) – *“And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*

Did you catch the language of substitutionary sacrifice? *“This is my body, which is given **FOR YOU**...This cup that is poured out **FOR YOU** is the new covenant in my blood.”*

The Savior died in your place, as your substitute. That means He died for you... instead of you...in your place in order to purchase you for His own purposes!

The bread and the cup remind us that the Lamb of God sacrificed Himself as payment for sinners, fully satisfying God’s justice. He poured out His life so our sins can be pardoned.

Before we receive communion it’s important to reflect and take a spiritual inventory. 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”*

- **Consider your relationship with God**
- **Confess any sins that God brings to mind**
- **Commit afresh to the Great Commission**

We practice open communion here. You don’t need to be a member of Edgewood to participate, but you do need to be born again.

Directions for Opening Cup

1. Hold the cup with one hand and with the other find the clear tab and pull gently to open in order to take the bread → Take bread
2. Continue to hold the cup and now find the foil tab and pull carefully to open the juice cup. Be careful while pulling – you don’t have to pull it completely off → Take juice