

**The Jesus Way** / **JESUS CHRIST DISCIPLEMAKER**  
**The Great Omission**  
**Matthew 28:19-20**

<sup>16</sup> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:16-20

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an unusual advertisement appeared in several British news papers. It consisted of an appeal to the young men of England to accompany the explorer Ernest Shackleton on his first trip to the South Pole. The advertisement said this: “Need men to make an adventurous journey. Small salary, long, dark months, unlikely to return without accident, honor in the case of success.”

Shortly after this appeal appeared in the newspapers, Shackleton spoke of the overwhelming response he had received: “It seems that all the men of Great Britain want to follow me!” he said.

Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus Christ gave a far greater challenge to his disciples. As his ministry opened he called his first disciples saying, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” As His ministry closed he left his disciples these words known as the Great Commission.

Jesus here tells his disciples to do exactly what he had modeled for them for the last three-and-a-half years. They are to “make disciples.” This was the most significant thing that Jesus did in his ministry. He wrote no books. He founded no organization. Instead he wrote his life into the hearts of twelve men. He simply invested in only 12 men, one of whom was a traitor. He placed the entire future of his mission in the hands of these men. If they had failed in their task, the church of which we are a part would not exist today.

Unfortunately, what is known as the Great Commission has also been dubbed the Great “omission” of the church. Though the early disciples took it very seriously and gave their lives to see it accomplished, it took from the beginning of church history to beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century for committed believers to become just 2.5% of the world’s population.

The situation is not much brighter today, at least in America. While the church is exploding in growth in certain parts of the world, since 1994 the number of faithful Christ-followers in America has declined from 17 percent to 12 percent. Today it takes 100 church attendees, a pastor and \$100,000 a year to win someone to Christ. And overall in our approaches to carrying out ministry and mission, we have opted for addition rather than multiplication.

When all else fails, read the directions! And Jesus' directions for his church are found right here. But what precisely does that mean, to "make disciples?" We can never understand how we are to "make disciples" unless we understand how Jesus himself made disciples. And even more basically, we must understand what a disciple is in the first place. Otherwise, the Great Commission will continue to remain the Great "Omission" of the church.

To help us understand what Jesus' directions given to you and me are all about, I would like us to answer three questions this morning.

- What is a disciple?
- How did Jesus make disciples?
- Where are *you* in the process of discipleship?

## WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

First, what is a disciple? After all, this is not a word that is a part of our everyday vocabulary. And when it is used, it's been in a negative sense, like the "disciples" of Jim Jones who committed mass suicide back in the 70s.

The word "disciple" means simply a *learner*. The term is used over 250 times in the Gospels and the book of Acts. It refers to someone who learns by following someone else. The concept of a disciple was in no way limited to Christ and his disciples. John the Baptist had his disciples,<sup>i</sup> the Pharisees had their disciples,<sup>ii</sup> and even Moses is said to have his disciples.<sup>iii</sup>

But there is more. A disciple is not only a learner. A disciple is a *follower*. The learning process always takes place in close association between the teacher and the learner, between the "discipler" and the disciple. No hint here of an "ivory tower" learning experience. No, Jesus' disciples learned as they *followed*.<sup>iv</sup> Oh yes, Jesus did *teach* his disciples. The entire Sermon on the Mount and the Upper Room Discourse are examples of the more formal instruction that Jesus gave to his band of followers. But he taught as much, if not more, by example. His disciples learned from Jesus the art of meeting and ministering to people. They observed him in situations of conflict as he cleansed the temple. They saw him show such tangible compassion for the sick. They observed as he escaped the pressing crowds to pray to his Father in heaven. They witnessed his miracles. They would never forget that evening on the lake of Galilee as Jesus calmed the wind and waves with such authority. They saw him cast out demons and heard him preach that the Kingdom of God had arrived.

For the disciples, following Jesus was no mere academic experience. The emphasis was not on *information* in the head, but *transformation* of life.<sup>v</sup> A disciple, then, is a *teachable follower who is becoming more like Christ*.

A student learns what his teacher knows, but a disciple becomes what his master is. Would you say that with me? *A student learns what his teacher knows, but a disciple becomes what his master is*. I hope we "get it." As we go through this series *Jesus-Christ, Disciplemaker*, I hope

we come out on the other end realizing that this is what it's all about. It's not first of all about *doing*, but about *being* and *becoming* and then helping others do the same.

## HOW DID JESUS MAKE DISCIPLES?

The second question I would like us to explore this morning is this: *How did Jesus make disciples?* After all, if we are to "make disciples," we need to understand how Jesus made disciples.

Jesus' disciple-making process began with a simple call to the curious: "Come and see." I would like you to look again with me at John 1:35-39.

<sup>35</sup> The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. <sup>36</sup> When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup> When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" <sup>39</sup> "***Come,***" he replied, "***and you will see.***" So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour. John 1:35-39

Here, Jesus calls his first disciples: Andrew, John, Peter, Philip and Nathanael. They were spiritually *curious*.<sup>vi</sup> Their curiosity had been stoked by John the Baptist saying, "Look, here's the lamb of God." Being the good Jews that they were, they knew that this title had something to do with providing forgiveness of sin. Their curiosity is heightened. So they begin to follow Jesus. But then Jesus' asks, "What do you want?" These five wanna-be disciples avoid the question, simply asking Jesus, "Where are you staying?" (verse 38). They knew that their questions couldn't be answered in a few short minutes. They needed some in depth time with Jesus. They needed some leisurely moments to "hang out" with Jesus, to inquire, question, and come to grips with the most important question that any human can ask, "Who is this Jesus?"

Are you in this phase of simply *exploring* the claims of Christ like these first disciples? You're curious. You're seeking. You want to know more. You haven't yet "stepped across the line" so to speak, taking the step of believing faith. Let me encourage you to continue to seek, to know, to come, to explore. Jesus is saying to you what he said to these first disciples: "Come and see."

Notice how Jesus, the master disciple-maker, responded to their questions. All he said was "Come and see." For Jesus, there was no four point outline to explain the gospel, no *Four Spiritual Laws*, no pre-packaged presentation. After all, becoming a Christ-follower involved so much more than believing a body of doctrine. It was all about knowing a person.

The process of exploring the claims of Christ with someone may look different each time according to the situation. The other day Mary Alice and I were at the cemetery where our oldest boy is buried. While watering the plants, a man approached whose wife is buried fairly close to our son. We could tell he was at a point of deep need as he wrestled with his grief. As we shared about our son and as he shared about his wife whom he had lost fifteen months ago, God opened the door to simply pray with this man. We prayed in the name of Christ, we prayed for God's comfort in his grief. And now we pray for his eternal salvation as we follow up.

This phase of allowing these first curious followers to explore his claims to messiahship Christ lasted about four months, from late summer to late winter of AD 29. Jesus' objective during this period of time was to see this first group of rag-tag followers brought to the point of saying "yes" to trusting in Him, and "no" to themselves.

We are going to see in the coming weeks that "making disciples" begins right here. It doesn't begin with helping those who are already Christians grow in their faith. No, it begins with helping the curious come to faith. We as a church are *not* fulfilling the Great Commission to "make disciples" unless we are exploring the claims of Christ with those who have not yet believed. More about that next week.

But there was a second phase in Jesus' ministry of "making disciples." This is found in Mark 1:16-18.

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> ***"Come, follow me,"*** Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." <sup>18</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him. Mark 1:16-18

If the call of John 1 was to "come and see," the call of Mark 1 is "follow me." And if the call of John 1 was directed to the *curious*, the call of Mark 1 is given to the *convinced*.<sup>vii</sup>

Some have confused the first call of the disciples – the "come and see" call found in John 1 – with this one. But they are two different calls. After the disciples spent about four months *coming* to faith, they then entered a ten month period of *growing* in their faith. They are now convinced and on their way to being more fully committed. Jesus' objective during this phase of working with his disciples was to bring them to the point of saying "yes" to growing as Christ-followers, and "no" to staying the same.

Many of us get stuck right here in our own discipleship. In fact, a recent study on local churches says that 70% of believers today are stuck in this phase of discipleship. Even after years of being a Christ-follower, so many are still learning, or needing to relearn, the basics of prayer, Bible study, sharing their faith, being a vital part of the local church, along with a basic understanding of foundational Bible doctrines.

Recent statistics tell us that more than 60 percent of Bible-believing Christians today have no intentional goals for their spiritual development and no relational accountability to help them progress in their faith.<sup>viii</sup> For so many today, the only difference between a Christian and his neighbor is the Christian's strange habit of getting his car and driving to his church on Sunday morning. We have perfected the art of camouflage.

I have a suspicion that many of us think we are far beyond this phase, but we are stuck. As the writer to the Hebrews says, "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" (Hebrews 5:12).

But Jesus wanted his band of followers to progress past this point. He wanted them to move from following him to an even greater level of intimacy and effectiveness by “being with him.” This is found in Mark 3:13-14 –

<sup>13</sup> Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. <sup>14</sup> He appointed twelve-designating them apostles-that they might *be with him* and that he might send them out to preach Mark 3:13-14

This was a definitive turning point in Jesus’ relationship with his disciples. After spending about 10 months in a phase of *establishing* them in their faith, he now began to spend more intensive, intentional time *equipping* them to minister to others.<sup>ix</sup> And they were ready for this, having moved from being simply convinced that Jesus was the Messiah to being committed to his person and mission.

This phase – which we might call “Be with Me” – lasted for 20 months. Jesus’ objective during this time was to bring his disciples to the point of saying “yes” to serving others and “no” to the many distractions that could keep them from being effective. You see, being a disciple at this phase is like being in a funeral procession...*your own*. You are learning to die to self and live for Christ. You are being equipped to serve.

But it doesn’t stop there. We must move on to the final phase. Jesus did. And he did it with his disciples. This is the phase of “Remain in me.” On the night of his betrayal Jesus was with his disciples in the Upper Room. He said these words,

*Remain in me*, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit unless it remains in the vine...This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. John 15:4, 8

True disciples bear fruit. That fruit is seen in becoming more like Christ. But it is also seen in making other disciples. Jesus’ intention is that you and I multiply. True disciples find their own disciples. When Jesus left the Great Commission to his disciples, he said “teach them to obey all that I have commanded you.” And a vital part of what Jesus commanded his disciples was to “make disciples.”

These same disciples who had moved from mere curiosity to being convinced to growing in their commitment are now *commissioned*. What Jesus had taught them and modeled for them, they were now to pass on to others. But this is where we begin to run into problems. This is where the Great Commission has become more or less the Great “Omission” of the church.

Are you at this phase? Do you recognize that as a believer-disciple, you have been “commissioned?” Do you realize that you have been called to multiply? You see, the Great Commission of Matthew 28 was not given to an elite “clerical” force, the “professional” pastor or missionary. These 12 disciples represent in embryonic form the church. This commission to “make disciples” is given to *all* of us who are now part of Christ’s church. There are *no* exemptions!

In the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, the American women's 4 x 100 relay race was favored to win the gold medal. The team featured Marion Jones, a sprinter who had won four gold medals at the previous games in Sydney. The American team was already off to a strong start when Jones took the baton for the second leg of the race. She gained ground as she ran her 100 meters and approached Lauryn Williams, a young speedster who would run the third leg.

Williams began running as Jones drew near, but when she reached back to receive the baton, they couldn't complete the handoff. Once, twice, three times Jones thrust the baton forward, but each time it missed William's hand—she couldn't seem to wrap her fingers around it. Finally, on the fourth try, they made the connection. But by that time, they had crossed out of the 20-yard exchange zone and were disqualified. Everyone knew they were the fastest team on the track. The night before, they'd had the fastest qualifying time. But when they couldn't complete the handoff, their race was over.

As important as it is for each of us to set the pace by living authentically, at a certain point, a handoff must be made in which another receives the baton of faith and begins to run with it. That handoff isn't as easy as it looks. It isn't automatic. It's the result of thousands and thousands of practice runs.<sup>x</sup>

## **WHERE ARE YOU IN THE PROCESS OF DISCIPLESHIP?**

The final question we want to ask this morning is: *Where are you in the process of discipleship?* Are you *spiritually curious*, wanting to explore the claims of Christ? We want to help you in that process. Keep coming. Keep asking questions. Most of all, read this book (the Bible) and allow the living Christ to speak to your heart. Jesus' words to you are, "Come and see."

Are you *convinced* that Jesus is who he claims to be, but you are not yet *established* as a Christ-follower? Are you yet needing to learn the basic spiritual disciplines of prayer and the daily intake of Scripture? Are you needing to learn the basic doctrines of the faith? Jesus' words to you are "Follow me."

Or maybe you have come to the point of growing commitment in these areas, but your need now is to be *equipped* to serve others...to do the work of ministry. If so, Jesus' words to you are "Be with me." Or maybe you are further down the road and you are sensing that God is *entrusting* to you the responsibility of mentoring others in their journey of discipleship. If so, Jesus' words to you are "Now remain in me, I am entrusting to you the work of ministry."

My prayer is that in the coming weeks, we can each identify just where we are in this exciting adventure of following Christ and know what the next step is in the process of becoming more like Jesus.

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<sup>i</sup> Matt. 11:2; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; John 1:35, 37.

<sup>ii</sup> Matt 22:16; Mark 2:18.

<sup>iii</sup> John 9:28.

<sup>iv</sup> Since “disciple” implies “follower,” and since Jesus was no longer present to “follow” in the most physical sense of the term, the writers of the epistles may have been hesitant to use this term and therefore substituted the term “believer” or “Christian.” See James G. Samra, “A Biblical View of Discipleship,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (April-June, 2003): 219-34

<sup>v</sup> The word “disciple” implies the existence of a personal, intimate attachment which shapes the entire life of the disciple. G.W. Bromily, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1967), 457-459.

<sup>vi</sup> Part of the confusion comes when the term “disciple” refers to different groups of people. For example, sometimes the word refers to those who are simply *curious*. In John 6 we find some disciples of Jesus who are troubled by Jesus’ explanation about “eating” his flesh and blood. Admittedly, it’s a statement that could trouble you and me too! John 6:60 says, “On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’” In fact, it troubled them so much that verse 66 says, “From this time many of his *disciples* turned back and no longer followed him.” Why? They were curious, that’s all. They were “disciples” in the sense that they were *following* Jesus about the countryside wanting to learn more. But when Jesus’ teaching became hard to understand, they quickly turned aside.

<sup>vii</sup> The term “disciple” refers more often to the *convinced*. These people *have* placed their faith in Christ and are convinced that he is who he claims to be and that he has done what he has claimed to do – that is, provide eternal salvation for sinners like you and me. A good example of this use of the word “disciple” is found in Acts 6. Notice what it says: “In those days when the number of *disciples* was increasing...” (Acts 6:1). And then verse 7 says, “The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly...” Who are the “disciples?” They are simply the “believers” *convinced* in their mind and heart that Jesus is who he says he is (cf. John 8:30-31).

<sup>viii</sup> George Barna

<sup>ix</sup> In some passages, the term “disciple” refers to those who associate with Jesus Christ more intimately. These could be called the *committed*. There are two things that seem to characterize a disciple at this phase. The first is growing *intimacy*. Among Jesus’ disciples were the seventy (Luke 10:1), and then the Twelve (Matthew 10:1). And even among the twelve, there were three – Peter, James and John – who seemed to have enjoyed a particularly intimate relationship with Christ (Luke 9:28). It was to these three that Jesus revealed himself on the mountain. The second thing that characterized Jesus’ disciples at this phase was growing *ministry*. They were being equipped to serve. That’s why in the two passages mentioned – Luke 10:1 and Matthew 10:1 – they are sent out to preach. They had seen Jesus preach. Now Jesus was saying, “OK, guys, it’s your turn.” Go out, minister, come back and we’ll evaluate. But to do this, they had to be committed.

<sup>x</sup> Bryan Wilkerson, "From Generation to Generation," PreachingToday.com