

Matthew 28:18-20 ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

If you have been around here during the last five years you will know that I have spoken many times on the issue of discipleship and being a disciple. God has been stirring my heart again on this vital subject and for these next 3 weeks this will be our teaching theme.

Sometimes it is good to go back to the days when Jesus walked the earth and see what actually happened to the first disciples who became His followers. Foundational. It was nothing short of miraculous! Those 12 men were catapulted from their workaday worlds in the villages around Galilee, mostly fishermen, onto the world stage, fishing for men in the name of God.

The history is well-known. They began a movement that changed the world. Within one generation Christianity spread across the civilised world, **conquering creeds and philosophies**, winning the hearts of **artisans and aristocrats**, the **paupers and the privileged, men and women** of all ages and nationalities, from **street beggars to Caesar’s household**. Tranfd socty.

And what was their secret? What was their driving force? Of course, it was Jesus, the amazing person he was - **who wouldn’t want to be an ambassador** for this messenger from God who had brought such revelation, such healing and wholeness, who had transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people for good as they encountered Him. Only he brought help and hope into what was a very dark world.

But there was something else! It wasn’t just because of who Jesus was – but who they had become! The transformation they experienced and passed on to others came through discipleship. They were disciples! They made disciples who made disciples. Their transformation occurred because they applied the principles of discipleship - 1st to themselves and then to others. D’ship has an amazing power to transform and revolutionise. And listen up, D’ship not an optional, peripheral or temporary event – life-blood of the church. And it’s this element of discipleship that I believe we need to restore to our church again.

But do we know what discipleship is?

You would be forgiven if you thought that ‘disciples’ refers only to the original 12 who Jesus trained. After all, there are 233 occurrences of the word disciple(s) in the Gospels, mostly with specific reference to those 12 guys – ‘the disciples’. In Acts this reduces 28. But in the rest of the NT there is not one mention! Some have therefore concluded that discipleship is irrelevant today, not applicable to us. It was only for the first disciples – to get things started.

We know that ‘disciple’ in the NT world was well understood. The Jews had models of discipleship in Moses/Joshua and Elisha/Elijah, the Pharisees (Lk 5:33) and Jn the Baptist (Mt 11:2, Lk 11:1). In the Greek world Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and other Greek philosophers had their disciples. To be a disciple or a follower of someone required relationship, commitment, accountability. It was like a personal apprenticeship, to have your life moulded and transformed by your teacher, a mentor and trainer. Everybody knew this.

That’s what happened with the disciples of Jesus. He called them to follow him, to be with him, to obey his teachings, imitate his character and learn his skills. After Jesus spent 3 ½ years with them the transformation was both amazing and obvious to everyone. In fact, one of the comments made by enemies of the first Christians was, ‘When they saw the courage of Peter and John and

realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.' Acts 4:13 They were disciples. They had transformed lifestyles!

But to say that Jesus-style discipleship was confined to those first 12 disciples & not to us, is totally un-biblical. Firstly, **Matthew 12:18-20**.....Making disciples should be the major focus of every Christian, in every church, in every place, and in every age until Jesus returns. I believe we need to recapture and rediscover the meaning of these verses, because in them we find Jesus' secret of our personal maturity, the health of our church and the effective evangelisation of our world.

And regarding the argument that the rest of the NT is a silent because it doesn't use the word disciple, do you know that every principle of teaching, training and shaping people's lives that Jesus employed is restated by the apostle Paul and the other writers to implement in local churches, though in different ways. **Furthermore**, even the teachings which are initiated by Jesus are expanded, clarified and applied by Peter, Paul, James, and John and the others. They don't use the word disciple, but they certainly employ the practice!

1 Cor 11:1 'Be followers of me even as I am Christ.'

2 Tim 2:2 'The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.'

Phil 4:9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

1 Cor 4:17-18. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

Acts 11:26 'The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.' These are synonymous terms. Christians are disciples. Disciples are like Christ. Discipleship is not just for new Christians, or for more serious Christians, or for those training in some particular skills, or a leadership role. No! We have all been called to be followers of Christ. This was Jesus' Master Plan to reach the world and to change it! We have been chosen to be on the Master's team.

His design for you is the same as it was for the first disciples: to transform your life by teaching you truths that transform, by character formation (becoming like Jesus), by spiritual development (attaining an ever-increasing spiritual maturity, knowing God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, walking in the HS with all the consequent freedom, joy and usefulness which goes along with that) Amen!

This is the high calling of every believer – to be his apprentice, a trainee of the SoG, a student of the Way of the King! To see our lives gradually change and be the lights of the world and the salt of the earth that Jesus called us to be. This is what makes Christian life exciting!

The big question is 'How are you doing?'

Well, how would you know?

What criteria would you use to answer that question?

Not only do you need to know, but church leaders need to know.

Elders and house group leaders need to be able to apply some sort of criteria to see how they are doing at their jobs.

Gal 4:19. The role of leaders is clear: to mature believers, to see Christ formed in them.

Eph 4:12-13 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ. Glory to God – best is yet to come!

There's lots of criteria in Scripture: measurements to help determine where you are, stage at.

John speaks of dear children, young men and fathers | Jn 2:12-14

Paul speaks of infants being on milk and solid food for the mature Heb 5:13-14

Peter gets really detailed saying 'For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective & unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. **2 Pet 1:5-8**
2 Peter 3:18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You get the idea of a measurable progression, development and improvement.

To help understand areas of growth for every Christian you really need a definition of discipleship. **'Intentional training in Bible knowledge, character, skills and spirituality, in an environment of accountability and loving relationships.'**

So how are you doing? Let's be honest here! If you were to evaluate where you are from 1-10 in any of these disciplines, where would you put yourself?

Ask yourself these questions....

How are you in Bible knowledge? We are called to follow Jesus, to model out lives on Jesus. He quoted from 22 OT books – which means he memorised from every section of the OT. How's your knowledge of the OT? Have you memorised any part of the Bible at all. 1-10?

Mt 28:18-20 Jesus commanded 212 things, summed up in three statements: **1.**Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. **2.**Love your neighbor as yourself. **3.**Love your enemies. Do you know any more? – the other 209?

What about character? Are you a nicer person now than when you were first converted? If you are different is it because of age or hard experiences, or because you have spent time with Jesus becoming more and more like him? How would others rate you? 1-10?

What about your ministry or serving gifts? Have you improved in some area of Christian service since this time last year? Eph 2:10 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' Have you invested any time or effort in improving some skills or talents with which was serving God? Read books, attended courses..

What about your interior life, the spiritual formation of your inner self? Are you more sensitive to the Holy Spirit than you were before? Have you learned about the promptings of the Holy Spirit in either doing something or not doing something? Eg the Puritans knew when it was jes or HS!!

What about your private sins? Have you chosen to keep them in the back room of your life, occasionally calling them out for a little carnal pleasure? Or are you doing what Paul said by putting your fleshly nature the death? Only you can answer the question! **How is your holiness score before God?** 1-10?

Now, is not my purpose to make you feel bad about yourself because you didn't do well at self examination. Rather, my intention is to underscore the fact that none of us have really put discipleship, that's the intentional pursuit of becoming more like Jesus, in practice either personally or in our church life. It's not your fault. I don't think it's the leaders fault - especially as I am a leader! It is my belief that God is restoring the truth of a practical and workable and accessible means of personal and godly transformation, with all the benefits of Holy Spirit inspired joy, peace, fulfilment and usefulness, available for us again, today!

God is putting discipleship back on the agenda of the church & is issuing a call for followers again.

It's been 2000 years since Jesus ascended into heaven but his words still wing their way across two millennia to us in this room today, "if any man will follow me

Lk 9:23 Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

'Whoever' means everybody. 'Wants to be my disciple' means you got to have a desire to follow, to become more like him and to obey his commands. 'Must deny themselves' means just what it says, that's living Jesus not for yourself. 'Taking up the cross daily' means this is more than a decision today, more than a New Year's resolution which lasts a few days or weeks, but a perpetual lifestyle of dying to the old life to enjoy the new. Salvation is free but discipleship is costly. Will you recommit yourself to discipleship today? The only God's help to action this possibility. Would you like to respond today? We'd like to pray for you.

One bright light in medieval times: Francis of Assisi was in love with a noble and sweet woman; he dreamed of a happy marriage, playing children and a home. But he longed to dedicate himself to poverty and pilgrimage for Christ's sake. After making his decision, the lovely face of the one dearer than all else on earth haunted him in a strange dream. One bright moonlit night when the earth was covered with a blanket of snow, his brothers in the monastery saw him rise and go out into the grounds. There he fashioned from the snow an image of his beloved and still other images of the children who were not to be. In a family circle he arranged them and sat in their midst, imaginatively enjoying the bliss of home and companionship for one delicious hour. Then, slowly rising, he kissed them all in a tearful farewell and re-entered the monastery, never to allow such dreams to interfere again with what he considered to be his debt to Christ. TC & what a life lived!

I noticed recently that the first disciples 'left everything' when they followed Jesus.

Luke 18:28-30 Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."