

Mission: Make Disciples
317 Vision Series

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February 9, 2020

Good morning! If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Matthew 28. As you are turning there, let me remind you we are in our series called 317 where we are talking about what it means to be a church not just *in* our city, but *for* our city. Not just a church in the 317, but a church that exists for the good of the 317. And as we are talking about the vision, mission, and priorities of the church, we are using the grid of our area code to keep our focus on the community God has called us to. We want to pursue a three-fold mission, a singular vision, and seven priorities. To kick things off we talked about our singular vision: to connect people to Jesus. And the last couple of weeks we talked about our three-fold mission: love God, love people, and today we get to talk about making disciples.

Our mission comes from the teaching that Jesus himself placed the greatest weight and significance upon. When he was asked what the most important command in the Bible was, he said: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And love other people as yourself.” That is his Great Commandment. And the Great Commandment erupts into the Great Commission: If we live a life of love for God and love for others, we will inevitably have a life focused on **making disciples**.

In Matthew 28 Jesus has already died for the sins of the world, he has risen from the dead, he has revealed himself to more than 500 people. And then, as his last and final act before ascending into heaven, we see this:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth 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.”
(Matthew 28:16-20)

There are several aspects of Jesus’ final words I want to focus on. First, he gives a very clear command: Make disciples. That begs the question, what is a disciple? There are two words that describe what discipleship is about. The first is **student**. A student is someone who wants to learn. You typically think about a classroom with a teacher, and the student is listening to the lectures, soaking in the information, and gaining mastery of the content presented.

For students of Jesus, the classroom is life. That’s why a second definition of the word is helpful: **apprentice**. Now an apprentice is a student, but specifically an on-the-job student. Many trades like carpenters, plumbers and electricians have apprenticeships. You don’t sit in a classroom and look at pictures of how to build a house, you go to a jobsite and do hands-on learning. My dad is an electrician. He changed careers in his 40s. I remember when he started his electrical apprenticeship. He went to class several hours a week to learn the theories and equations from an instructor, but he also worked 40 hours on construction sites with master electricians, learning how to implement everything he was learning. After 4 years of studying and apprenticing, he finally got his journeyman’s license. He went from knowing next to nothing about electricity to being able to wire up a house or an entire 500,000 square foot building.

When Jesus tells his followers to make disciples, he wants us to enroll people in the school of Christ. He wants us to help people become his apprentices. And though Jesus was a carpenter, we are clearly not trying to train people to build cabinets the way Jesus made cabinets; we are trying to train people to live their lives the way Jesus lived his life. So to answer the original question, what is a disciple—a disciple is not just a student or an apprentice. A disciple is someone who has learned to look, live, and love like Jesus.

Listen to what Christ himself said in **Luke 6:40**: “...**everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.**” That’s what Christ is after in our lives. Not just to change the way we think or what we believe; he wants us to be like him in every area of our lives. It’s very common these days, if someone were to ask you what you believe, and you happen to believe in Jesus, for you to respond by saying, “I am a Christian.” But let me ask you, do you know how many times the word “Christian” is used in the Bible? Three times. How many times do you think the word “disciple” is used? Two hundred sixty-nine. What’s the emphasis? Not an adjustment in what we *believe*, but a transformation in how we *live*.

Discipleship begins with conversion. Discipleship begins when a person says, “I am not going to continue to live life my own way. I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, he’s my savior and I trust him to forgive me of all my sins. I want to make him the Lord of my life and hand control over to him.” That’s what happens at baptism. Jesus says there are two things required to make disciples. And look, the first one is this: “...**baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**” (**Matthew 28:19**). People have to have that conversion experience where they die to their old life and are immersed into the life of the triune God. But that is where a lot of churches check out. After someone is baptized they say, “Great, they’re saved! Who else do we need to tell about Jesus?”

But baptism is just step one. Look at what else Jesus said we have to do: “...**teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**” (**Matthew 28:20**). This is the pivotal second step in discipleship, teaching and training people to obey everything Jesus has commanded us. As a church, we want to do what Jesus said! It’s not enough to be content to baptize hundreds of people a year, it’s not enough to say, “God, I love you, and I’m trying my best to love other people.” We have to take to heart Jesus’ final words and be able to say with confidence: At this church, we are personally learning to obey everything Jesus commanded so that we are always *growing* as disciples, and we are helping others to obey everything Jesus commanded so we can *make* disciples.

One of the more influential figures in Christianity of the last 100 years was a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This man was born in Germany to very privileged and highly educated parents. He excelled in everything he put his hand to, and in his late teenage years, began to study theology. He eventually came to the US, surrendered his life to Christ and was gaining a lot of influence for his mixture of intellect and passion. Then his home country began to fall into disrepair. He could have stayed in America and enjoyed a path of safety and religious prestige, but he chose to return to Germany and try to make a difference.

When Hitler kicked all Jewish people and Jewish pastors out of the church in Germany, Bonhoeffer led a resistance movement. He said, we have to raise up a church powerful enough to withstand the deception of Hitler and the cunningness of his evil agenda. So he formed a little seminary in a region of Germany called Finkenwalde, about 45 miles to the northeast of Berlin. There he trained a few dozen students who wanted to be part of training up a resistance church.

Every day the students spent hours studying the Bible, hours in prayer, they made a covenant to live by the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. It was a rigorous and encompassing experience. One day, one of Bonhoeffer's friends came to visit him to catch up and see what was happening at the seminary. After observing what was going on, he pulled Bonhoeffer aside and commended him for his zeal and effort but then said, "I think this is a little too intense. You need to dial it back a bit." Bonhoeffer looked at his buddy and said, "Come with me." He took him in a rowboat across the lake, hiked up a hill to overlook where the Nazis were training their soldiers. They observed the drills, the exercises, and the indoctrination. Then Bonhoeffer said, "Do you see what's happening there? *This* must be stronger than *that*!"

That's what I want to say about the culture at this church! This world is trying to train you and shape you and form you into a certain kind of person with a certain kind of character, certain kinds of belief systems, certain kinds of priorities, and the world is really good at it. **Romans 12:2** in the JB Philipps translation says, "**Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.**" That's the natural way of the world: to be squeezed into the mold of the world. Discipleship says no: I don't want to be squeezed into the mold of the world, I want to be squeezed into the mold of Jesus.

Bonhoeffer's most well-known book, which describes what it looks like to really follow Jesus, is called *The Cost of Discipleship*. And it's important to say this: the cost of discipleship is really high—to really live the way of Jesus is demanding. Your life will feel like you are carrying a cross, like you are dying to yourself every day. There is a toll on your time, your relationships, your priorities, your hobbies, your family, your finances—there is no area of life that the call to discipleship does not touch. The cost of discipleship is great. I can only think of one thing that is greater than the cost of discipleship. Do you know what that is? The cost of non-discipleship. Think about that! Will following Jesus cost you a lot? Absolutely. Do you know what will cost you more? Not following Jesus.

What exactly is the cost of not following Jesus? You lose the love, joy, hope, and peace that comes from following Christ. You lose intimacy with your heavenly father that Jesus makes possible. And you have to live with the consequences of living a life contrary to the design you were created for.

Let me give you an example. If you bring a car home from the dealership and drive it around for a few weeks and then can't get it to start or run right, you might reasonably conclude you bought a lemon and the dealership ripped you off. But then let's say I start talking to you about your car maintenance, I ask what kind of fuel you are putting in it, and you say, "I've been getting the gas out of the green handle at the station. I hear diesel is good for engines." Well, we just found out the problem, didn't we. It's not that the car stinks or the manufacturer messed up or the dealer pulled the wool over your eyes. You didn't give the car what it needed to run. Follow the analogy: When God created humanity, it was his design and purpose for all of us to look, live and love like Jesus. And when we don't, when we do things our way instead of his way, we suffer the consequences. We are the ones who have to pay the price.

And do you know who else pays a price? The people closest to you. The people you love the most will have to suffer the consequences. Husbands, if you are not growing as a disciple and increasingly looking more like Jesus, do you know who pays the highest price, who is affected the most? Your wife. Wives, the same is true for you toward your husband. Parents, if you are not growing as a disciple and increasingly looking more like Jesus, do you know who is going to

suffer and bear the weight of that? Your kids. The greatest gift you can give the closest people in your life is your own transformation into the likeness of Christ. The most loving thing you can do for people is to say: I am going to grow as a disciple of Jesus, I am going to become his apprentice, I want to look like he looked, live like he lived, love like he loved, so that every time you see and interact with me, you are encountering the perfect love of God.

That is what the church is supposed to help people do! We are supposed to help transform people into the image of Jesus, not just teaching them to *believe* in him, but teaching them to *obey* everything he commanded us.

It's not enough for us to love God and love people, we have to make disciples. That is the crucial next step. Listen to what my friend Chad said about the effect discipleship had on him:

“The impact of discipleship on my life is impossible to express in words, let alone a single paragraph. I'm emotional even thinking about how I have been changed and so blessed that others discipled me and lived out what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission, or Paul taught in 2 Timothy 2:2 and Ephesians 4:12-16. These people directed me to Christ and poured into my life. And their discipleship has not only impacted my life—through them God has changed my marriage, my kids, my friends, my coworkers. The impact is generational. As I reflect, there is no doubt, the most sanctifying seasons of growth in my life have all occurred during the most intentional seasons of discipleship. And I will always thank God for the people who took the time and loved me enough to show me what it looks like to actually become more like the Jesus I have placed my faith in.”

How does discipleship happen? There are a lot of ways, but the primary way discipleship happens is when people meet in a small group and give focused attention to each person in that group becoming more like Jesus. We call those life groups. Every life group is going to have its own unique qualities, but most life groups meet once a week, most of them meet in someone's home, most of the time they share a meal. And after the meal, most of the time they open up God's word and talk about what God taught them through the weekend sermon and how God is inviting them and challenging them to grow in their faith and become more like Christ. They share each other's joys and burdens, they pray for each other, they help each other overcome strongholds, they serve and love people on mission together.

We did a short survey of people who have been in a life group for at least one year, asking them the impact that their life group has had on their discipleship. We asked about 10 questions with scores from 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high. Here are some of the questions and “before” and “after” scores:

- Where were you at in your own walk with Christ?
Before: 4 After: 7.5
- What was the health and Christ-centered focus of your marriage?
Before: 5 After: 8
- What was the strength of your Christian camaraderie and friendship with other believers?
Before: 2 After: 9
- Where were you in regard to your desire and ability to advance God's kingdom (evangelism, service, giving, disciple making, etc.)?
Before: 4 After: 8

That is the power of discipleship in the context of a life group!

We asked people for a brief testimony about their experience before and after intentionally growing as a disciple in this life group:

“My identity was in how people viewed me, now I am confident in who I am in Christ.”

“I’d gratify feelings of depression with things, now I have deep joy in Christian community.”

“I was focused on business and making money, now I’m focused on my family.”

“I was legalistic and hard-hearted, now I’m hopeful and loving.”

“I was controlling. Now I am free to trust.”

“I was blind to my own pride, now I am mindful of areas where I need to grow.”

“I was not in God’s Word. Reading the Bible every day, I’ve memorized three entire chapters!”

“I was discouraged, now I am hopeful.”

“I was exhausted and stressed. Now I am rested, focused, and filled with joy.”

“I was comfortably skating along in my small Christian life, now I am being challenged to share and help others grow in their Christian walk.”

When you hear that, tell me, who doesn’t want to be a part of that? Who doesn’t want to get in on discipleship? That is what our church is going to be about! That is our mission! And it starts at a young age. Even the students at our church are in a life group. They stay in those groups until they graduate high school. So their entire teenage years they have 3 or 4 adults of their same gender pouring into them and discipling them and helping them grow in their faith.

Listen to what a few of those students’ parents have said:

“We knew early on that raising our children to become God-honoring adults is not something we can accomplish on our own. That’s why we will always be grateful to the leaders at The Creek who have invested into the lives of our children to mentor and disciple them. Their life groups have been like second families. The relationships they have built with their group leaders have molded them into part of who they are today. They not only have deepened in their walk with God through their life groups, they have grown a heart for serving Him, too.”

Another family:

“As parents we are blessed to have Bible-believing adults that mentor our children and challenge them spiritually to be more like Christ (especially when they’re tired of hearing things from us). The people who have helped disciple our kids have celebrated milestones with them—like 16th birthdays, learning to drive, graduations—written reference letters, and visited colleges with them. As a parent, the word thank you will simply never be enough.”

Another family:

“My daughter has no fewer than four adult women speaking into her life in harmony with me and my wife. They have sacrificed hour upon hour and day upon day to be with her. They

travel around the world on mission trips together and they have career discussions and provide counsel on how to approach life after high school; they pray with her; and the list could go on to include so much more.”

“We will be forever grateful to each individual who chose to take part in helping to disciple our children so that they may choose to persevere in God’s love.”

At this church, from young to old, we are going to do whatever it takes to grow as disciples.

Before we end I want to go back to two passages we looked at earlier today. These are Jesus’ words. **Matthew 28:19-20a: “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.”** That is the Great Commission. That’s what we want to do. Every person who calls this their church home, that is our mission. Personally we want to be disciples who obey everything Jesus commanded, and we want to make disciples who obey everything Jesus commanded.

That leads to **Luke 6:40: “...everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.”** We don’t just want to believe in Jesus. By God’s grace and for his glory, we want to actually become like Jesus.