



'IN YOUR GOING, MAKE DISCIPLES'

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Matthew 28:16-20

Third Message

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A few weeks ago, I received a gift for Father's Day that I will never forget — a ticket to a practice round for the U.S. Open Golf Championship at Pebble Beach. Seeing the professional golfers up close was great, but for me, the most significant part of the day came before the practice round began. Just after sunrise, on the 18th green there was a very emotional and heart-felt tribute to the U.S. Open defending champion Payne Stewart. In August of 1999, he along with two others died in a mysterious and tragic plane crash. Payne, who is survived by his wife and two children, was a uniquely gifted and talented golfer. Before he died he had reached the pinnacle of his professional life, with all the money and fame that came with that.

At the tribute, Payne's wife, Tracey, and his best friend, Paul Azinger, shared about Payne's life. Their words quickly moved from his accomplishments on the golf course to those off the course. After he became a Christian, Payne's priorities changed. Golf was still important to him, but his relationships with his family, his friends, and his God were paramount. It became obvious that his life had true significance not because he was a great golfer, but because he was a man of God who loved life and loved others passionately. There was a consistent theme in their remarks about Payne: he invested his life in the lives of others.

As I walked around the golf course that day I couldn't help but wonder what will be said of me when I die. What will Andy Drake be known and remembered for? What impact will my life have had on the people and the world around me? Have you ever wondered what your legacy will be? As Christians, what is to be our method and focus for making an eternal impact on the lives of others?

In Matthew chapter 28:16-20, Jesus addresses this very issue. At the end of this gospel we also come near the end of the Lord's time on earth. From the perspective of the world, he doesn't have much to show for it. All he has around him is a rag-tag group of eleven men who are confused and afraid. Jesus' ministry of reconciliation was between man and God, but how would his ministry continue on when he was gone? Who would carry it on and how would they do it? In our text this morning, we come to some of the last words spoken by Jesus to his disciples. Here in these verses we catch a clear vision for his strategy to continue to reach the world once he was gone.

Then the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up to them and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you

always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:16-20, NASB)

After Jesus had been crucified, his eleven disciples went to Galilee, where he had promised to meet them. Nearing the top of the mountain, most of them could see that the figure before them was Jesus, and they fell down prostrate before him in an act of worship. But others were hesitant. Could this really be Jesus resurrected from the dead? All their doubts were addressed, however, as Jesus comes closer and they hear his voice. What he says to them will forever change the course of their lives.

Jesus begins by saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." By saying this, Jesus is claiming that he, as the risen Christ, has been vindicated as the Son of Man, and has been invested with unrestricted and universal sovereignty. This marks a turning point in redemptive history, for the Messiah's "kingdom" has dawned in resurrection power.

Jesus limited himself while on earth, relying on the power of the Father to exercise his ministry in human form. But at his ascension, the full power of Jesus was released through his Spirit to men to carry on his ministry: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father...And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know him because He abides with you, and will be in you" (John 14:12,16).

The resurrection power of Jesus is available to his disciples and to us through his Holy Spirit. There is no restraint or limit to the power of God in us accomplishing his ministry. And all this resurrection power now at our disposal is not to erect buildings or build programs, but to disciple. Churches and programs may fail, financial backing may come and go, but discipleship, investing the life of Christ in you in others, will always be the cornerstone of God's strategy to share his life from one generation to the next.

The basic premise of discipleship is that our Christian faith is best communicated through a personal relationship. God did not communicate his love by raining down tracts upon the earth. He did not share his plea for repentance and message of hope by writing it in the sky. He came to us in human form, to love us, person to person. In the current church ministry environment, with the proliferation of new books, programs, resources and ideas, it is easy to overlook the importance of the principle that the Christian walk is best communicated and imitated person to person.

If you doubt this, think of which has been more important in your spiritual journey — the best sermon you ever

heard or a fellow believer who came alongside you for a season of time to nurture your growth in Christ? There is no questioning the power of God's Word on our life, but I think you will agree with me that it is our personal relationships with other believers that has made the deepest impact on our spiritual growth.

Discipleship was the strategy and method that Jesus chose to produce men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his ministry, and it is with the authority and power now given to Jesus that he equips and sends his disciples to go and make disciples. He says,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20).

The word for “go” literally reads “in your going”; and the verb to “make disciples” is an imperative. It is a command, not a suggestion. To put it in other words, we were re-born to reproduce. Discipleship is not intended simply as a hobby, as one of many options, or a special ministry for just a few. It is to be an integral part of our lifestyle as followers of Christ.

No longer are the disciples to pursue only “the lost sheep of Israel.” They have been given marching orders by their Commander-in-Chief to make disciples of all people regardless of their country, tribe, race or ethnic group.

According to Acts 10, it took the apostle Peter and many of the other disciples a while to truly understand what God was up to. However foreign it may have seemed to them, God was even calling out Gentiles to be a part of his holy nation. Thus Peter, after being reminded in a vision that the Gentiles were part of God's plan too, shared with them that everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ receives forgiveness of sins. And, after the Holy Spirit is poured out on them, he baptizes them and stays with them for a while to teach them still more.

It may seem a bit unusual in our present day for new believers to be baptized so soon after conversion. But it is important to remember that the New Testament can scarcely conceive of an unbaptized disciple of Jesus Christ. Baptism is a sign both of entrance into Messiah's covenant community and of pledged submission to his lordship. Baptizing and teaching are not the sole characteristics of disciple-making, but they are important elements in the process.

We have just concluded a series of messages on the gospel of Mark. If we take time to reflect on the ministry of Jesus to his twelve disciples from that gospel, we get a good picture of what making disciples looks like. I believe Jesus' relationship with his disciples can be characterized by three ingredients: he loved them, he taught them, and he challenged them.

First, it is obvious that Jesus loved them. He was the one who initiated their relationship. He sought them out, and he called them to follow him. A very important expression of his love was the great amount of time he spent with them. They lived life together. They ate together, traveled together, and prayed and worshipped together. Even when Jesus ministered to others he wanted them close at hand to observe and listen. And when they failed him, he never gave up on them. No matter how often they came up short, Jesus still communicated his love for them. He

did rebuke them, but he also encouraged and affirmed them.

Second, he taught them. He taught them in many ways: through sermons and parables, but also by asking them a lot of questions. Jesus also took advantage of teachable moments, where he would often get his disciples to probe and reflect on their faith. His most profound way of teaching came through modeling truth and love. By his actions he showed them how to flesh out their faith in the midst of the practicalities of their everyday lives. He repeatedly showed them how to love and serve others, how to learn from the Scriptures, how to handle their resources, and he took special care to show them how to pray.

Third, Jesus stretched them. He assigned them work and supervised them. He sent them out, and he gave them opportunities to test and challenge their faith. He pushed them to the edge of their comfort zone where they were forced to trust God to supply their needs. He also taught them to expect hardship along the way. Their growth came about in small steps. And as we see in our text today, he expected them to reproduce. They were to go out into the world and win others who would follow Christ and be his disciples also.

Following Christ, and him alone, is at the heart of discipleship. As one author put it:

The essence of the Christian faith is as simple and complex as: God loves you and desires a relationship with you through Jesus, God's only Son. Faith is accepting Jesus' invitation to follow him. Jesus did not say ‘follow this teaching’ or ‘follow this idea’ or ‘follow this commandment’ or ‘follow this ritual life’ but ‘follow me.’ As Jesus elaborates on what ‘follow me’ means, he reveals that it consists less in knowing this or believing that than losing oneself, denying oneself, bearing one's cross, embracing the other, and following after him. Faith in Jesus isn't intellectual assent to a set of beliefs but a relationship lived. What is evangelism then? It's inviting others into a relationship with God so that the Holy Spirit can make Christ come alive and live in them, so they can live in God's fullness and providence. Evangelism isn't leading people to information about Jesus or to right beliefs about Jesus – it's leading people to relationships with Jesus.¹

We began our summer series on evangelism by establishing our need to break down the barriers between ourselves and others and develop friendships with those we come into contact with. Last week, we were reminded that we are to introduce them to the good King and share with them how he has been good to us. In our passage today we pay attention to the next step in the evangelism process, to “go make disciples.” There is more to evangelism than reaching out and drawing in new believers. Once an individual becomes a member of our Christian community it is our calling and privilege as a church family to come alongside them and use our gifts to nurture their maturation in the faith.

This is what the apostle Paul speaks of in his letter to the Ephesians: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 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 fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, *speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ*. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (Eph 4:11-16).

To move from an infantile faith to a mature faith requires each of us in the body to use our gifts to build up one another. Discipling requires each of us to come alongside a fellow believer for a season of time to nurture their walk and growth in the Lord. Duffy Robbins says it well: "The process of Christian nurture is the one of preparing the soil for the good seed to grow, then planting that seed, helping it to take root, and nurturing its growth so that it can reproduce itself."² Let me take some time to share with you how the Lord has disciplined me over the years through the nurturing ministry of others.

By far and away my parents have had the greatest impact in nurturing my spiritual development. My mother and father provided an environment where I felt deeply loved and cherished. By their words and actions they made it clear that it was their faith in Jesus Christ that gave them the strength to love me unconditionally. They made going to church a high priority, and they insisted I attend "big church" with them ever since I was quite young. They modeled the importance of Christian truth by not only bringing their Bibles to church every week, but by being involved in a ministry that sold Christian books and resources at public fairs.

Their Christian walk was more than just a Sunday morning activity, it was an integral and natural part of their everyday lives. My mother consistently prayed with me, and she was the one who sat by my bedside as I invited Christ to come into my heart. My father served as a battalion leader to expose me to the Christian community of Christian Service Brigade. Even when they struggled through marital problems when I was in junior high, and divorced when I was in high school, they continued to strongly support my spiritual development. How thankful I am that the Lord gave me such parents to disciple me.

In Junior High I was befriended by Gil Sakima, a Junior High leader. He'd often pick me up on a Saturday and we'd go over to his house to have lunch and spend time together. Sometimes we'd throw the football around or play with his dog. On more than one occasion I even helped him do yardwork and work on the outside of his house. I was more than willing to be a source of very cheap labor for him, because we often found time to talk about life. He opened up his heart to me and shared about his struggles and triumphs. This set the stage for me to be open and honest about my struggles in life. He was a great listener and a great encourager, and he prayed with me during some very difficult times. I found out a few years ago that Gil had got divorced, and had fallen away from the faith, but I am always grateful for the way the Lord used him in my life.

During most of my high school years, Gary Vanderet was my pastor. He invited me to be a part of his small discipleship group. We met in his house to study and reflect

on the Scriptures. I had weekly Bible study assignments and when we got together we would keep one another accountable in our Christian walk. We'd discuss openly everything from the quality of our quiet time to the purity of our relationships.

Gary saw a glimpse of possible pastor/teacher gifts in me and he stretched me by asking me to teach God's Word in our high school Sunday school class as well as our annual missions trip to Mexico. When I started a Christian Club at Cupertino High School, he would accept my invitation to teach the group every now and then to support my ministry to my peers. Gary was there for me when I was down low because of my parent's divorce, and he was there at the high point of my high school graduation. What a blessing it was to have his support and nurture.

In college, God brought alongside me Reggie Coates. He and I would talk for hours on campus. Reggie modeled for me a passion for reaching out to non-believers. I'll never forget the weekend he took me as a member of his outreach team to share the gospel with people waiting on the streets in Pasadena for the Rose Bowl Parade. Reggie helped me to appreciate the power of memorizing and sharing the scripture to those who had never heard it.

As an adult, a number of godly men have come alongside me to encourage and nurture my walk with the Lord, men like Joel Werk and Dave Horn. Most recently, I have been getting together separately with Brian Morgan and Dick Bebb. Usually we go out for breakfast and we talk about our spiritual journey. They probe gently into my walk with the Lord, my relationship with my family, and my efforts in ministry. They are gracious enough when I ask to impart wisdom from their not-yet so advanced years. I so appreciate my times with these men and am grateful that the Lord continues his work of discipling me to maturity.

The Lord has used a variety of individuals and ways to draw me closer to him, but the common denominators are very much the same: I was loved, I was taught, and I was challenged to grow and stretch my faith.

Because I have been and continue to be disciplined by the Lord through the love and care of members of the body, I, too, have been used by God to disciple others. As a pastoral intern involved in the Junior High ministry some years ago, the first person I entered into a discipleship relationship with was a very young Pat Donohue. Poor Pat, I think it's taken him years to recover! I met with him at his house once a week and we would study the book of James together for about 20 minutes, and then played basketball in his driveway.

Frequently Pat would ask me questions for which I had no answer, and so my faith grew as I went to the scriptures for wisdom and insight. And I know Pat grew too, because it was not my words we meditated on, but God's. I was not the source of Pat's spiritual nourishment. I was simply a vessel trying to pour out the life of Christ within me. That was the beginning of what have been many years of coming alongside students as a youth pastor and growing together with them through a discipleship relationship.

Over the years I have discovered that nurturing the spiritual life of a brother or sister in the Lord is really not complicated or complex. I've seen teens do it. I've seen stu-

dents in college do it. I've seen parents and retirees and full-time workers do it. In this fast-paced and multi-task oriented valley we have difficulty simplifying and prioritizing life. Our culture screams at us to do many things, but discipleship requires focusing on nurturing a deep relationship or two. It does not take a degree from seminary, nor does it require 10 years of experience. It simply requires a heart full of love, faithful to give what you have received for the benefit and growth of another.

If you are not being discipled by someone, I would like to suggest you go before the Lord and ask him to direct you to a mature brother or sister in Christ who can spend time with you. I would like to challenge you to initiate a conversation with them and ask them if they would be willing to spend a season of time nurturing you in your walk with the Lord.

And if you are not discipling someone, I would like to suggest you go before the Lord and ask him to direct you to a brother or sister in the Lord who could benefit from your time with them. And I would like to challenge you to initiate a conversation with them and ask them if they would be interested in spending time with you so that together you can grow in your faith.

Planting seeds of spiritual nourishment in others is the one true legacy that has eternal significance. And the exciting thing is that you and I are called by the Lord himself to participate in this wonderful ministry. We are called to help others in their journey to become life-long learners and followers of Jesus Christ.

And we have the final words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel to remind us that we are not asked to do this on our own. Jesus says,

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:20)

The gospel ends, not with a command, but with the promise of Jesus' comforting presence. The literal translation for "always" is "the whole of every day." There is no vagueness about this assurance. It is a promise. Jesus is saying, "I am with you to do this. My active presence is with you to do what I have commanded." Each day, in our going, making friends and disciples, with its own trials, troubles and difficulties is also accompanied by Jesus' presence.

God is able to accomplish his work in and through us. He can overcome and even use our weaknesses. You may not be an extrovert, a talented speaker or a creative Bible teacher, but that will not disqualify you from the ministry of nurturing others in their faith.

Matthew's gospel ends with the expectation of a continued mission — a commission to his disciples to carry on the ministry of Christ. In this sense the gospel of Matthew is not a closed book. You and I are writing the final chapter as we engage in going out and making disciples for his glory.

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1. Leonard Sweet, "The Jesus Meme," *Youthworker* (Journal of Youth Specialties; Nashville: CCM Communications, March/April 2000).

2. Duffy Robbins, *The Ministry of Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).