

What is a Disciple?

When you think of the sermons that Jesus preached, which one comes to your mind first of all? I think that for most people who would have some familiarity with the gospels, the Sermon on the Mount is the pinnacle of Jesus' teaching. It sets out the agenda of the Kingdom in great detail and establishes, not just the behaviours, but the heart attitudes of the disciple, the person who wants to follow Jesus. It takes up three chapters of Matthew's gospel and deals with important issues like how to treat our enemies, how to relate to God, how to handle life's challenges, how to pray as well as marriage, forgiveness, judging others and making promises. We're going to spend the next few weeks digging into the Sermon on the Mount, starting with the Beatitudes and working our way to Jesus' teaching about the narrow gate through which people may enter God's Kingdom.

When we open our Bibles to chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel, the first words we read are these:

One day as the crowds were gathering, Jesus went up the mountainside with His disciples and sat down to teach them. This is what He taught them ... (5:1,2)

The Sermon on the Mount is a message for disciples, a discipleship manual, if you like. We need to hear Jesus' words as an instruction to the people who want God, who want God's Kingdom, who want to carry themselves in a way that God approves of. The English author, Thomas Smail, says this: "The purpose of Jesus is never JUST to meet people's needs, but always when they come with their needs, to make them disciples ... to cause them to want Him more than anything for themselves."

This is an important concept. Jesus didn't come to make people happy, to make people better, to sign people up for the Kingdom of Heaven. He came to start a movement that would change the world and that would bring glory to His Father in heaven. And He set about to achieve this by calling a small group of followers to Himself and training them, through teaching, correction and example, how to be people of the Kingdom, how to be, in fact, His disciples.

So, let's look at this term "disciple" and see how it describes our response to God and His Kingdom.

One of the texts that teaches us about discipleship is found at the end of Matthew, in chapter 28:19,20. Jesus had just said that He had now been given complete authority, both in heaven and on earth, then these words:

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The first thing that hits me as I read this is the simple call to go and make disciples. Jesus doesn't tell His closest followers to make converts, to begin a big healing

ministry or to alter the political structure of the Roman Empire ... although all of those things happened over the years that followed this commission. Their job is to make disciples. What does Jesus expect them to do in fulfilling this new responsibility? Two things: to baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey all of Jesus' commands.

What is the significance of those two steps in the process of making disciples?

1. The first step is to call people to make a decision to become a follower of Jesus. That's why Jesus tells His disciples to baptize people. Baptism is the visible sign of the decision to leave behind the old life, be washed clean of the sin and the penalty for sin, and to begin a new life. When the gospel was first preached, by Peter, in the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, his sermon reached its climax when he called out to the crowd in front of him, "So let it be clearly known by everyone in Israel that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah!" (37) The crowd was convicted by those words and answered back, "Brothers, what should we do?" And Peter's answer was that they should repent and be baptized. The New Living Translation puts it this way: "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (38) So baptism declares that a turning point has been reached, that our old view of life, and the old habits and practices that went with it, are now over and done with, and we have now turned to God and to following His lead. Peter then says that the decision to do this is met by God's gift of forgiveness of sin and His gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the first step in making disciples - calling people to make the decision to follow Jesus, to attach themselves to Him, for the rest of their journey in life. Notice that Jesus doesn't ask us to make followers of a rule book, a code of ethics, or a spiritual discipline. He wants us to draw people to an attachment to Him. Everyone is a disciple of something or someone, so we aren't asking people to enter into some new thing that they don't understand. We are all learning from someone, being shaped in some way or attaching ourselves to some idea or personality. The question is not, "Will you become a disciple?", but "Whose disciple are you going to be?" When a person agrees to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, they are declaring that they are choosing to become a Jesus-follower.
2. The second part of disciple-making looks to me like the really hard part: "teach them to obey all the commands I have given you." But I don't think it actually is the harder part. Because something has happened in the life of the person who has decided to follow Jesus. That something is that God has made His home in the heart of that person. Whereas they once wanted nothing to do with God, and especially with His commands, there is now the gift of humility that recognizes that He knows what's best for us and has a really good plan that is better than our plan. Yes, there is the struggle to obey - that's never easy for us - but there is something new in us that came with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that is the desire to obey, the desire to do things God's way and to honour Him with our lives. For those who are charged with making disciples, this is the best news possible. We are given the task of helping a person understand what pleases God, what is

appropriate for a person who is now following Jesus, but we don't have to make it happen - the Spirit is at work! Part of our role in that is living the life ourselves, walking in obedience and loving and serving others for Jesus' sake. That gives people an example to follow, helps them see what it's like to be a disciple. But, in the process of teaching and encouraging and sometimes challenging people to follow our Lord, we must trust the work of the Spirit, must trust that He is doing things in the person's heart to draw them close to Jesus' heart and to the kind of rich life Jesus promised.

3. There is another part to this Great Commission that we must pay attention to, and that is the call to the nations. This call of Jesus to make disciples is an inclusive call - it involves the whole world, people from every tribe and tongue and nation and people group. It was a new thing for Israel, at least in the sense that Israel had thought of itself as God's family on earth, exclusively His, meaning that no other nation on earth could call itself 'God's people'. But Jesus' words here opened the door for a much larger family of God. This is why we have missionaries and rescue workers and development agencies working among the poor of the world, showing them the compassion of Jesus and the love that is birthed in the heart of a Christian by the presence of God's Spirit.

So, we who follow Jesus have clearly been called to make disciples, to invite people from all nations to make the decision to follow Him, to signify that by being baptized and to learn to obey everything that Jesus commanded. What is that? What is it that Jesus has commanded all of His disciples to do? We could go through the Gospels and find all the commands that Jesus gave: things like, "Freely you have received, freely give", or "Be as cunning as snakes and as innocent as doves", but that would be a long list for the few minutes we have left today. Jesus also said that the whole law could be summarized in two commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and then love your neighbour as you love yourself. In another place, He told His followers to treat others the way they would want to be treated themselves. Later He gave this specific command to His disciples: Love one another as I have loved you.

At the heart of what Jesus commanded was this guiding principle: God is worthy of our love and devotion and we must start there. But, then, we must apply that to our own lives and begin to look at others with the same love and compassion that God has shown towards us. It's very simple, but it's also very difficult, because it works against the self-centredness that we find so motivational in our decision-making. But, if we can teach people and help them to love God and to love and serve the people He created and cares about, and if that becomes the guide to their decision-making, we will have gone a very long way in making disciples.

This commission that Jesus gave at the end of Matthew's Gospel is bracketed by two statements of great importance to us. We can't just take the commission by itself, without taking into account these two crucial statements.

The first is this: “Jesus came and told His disciples, ‘I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth.’” What’s this? Their friend, who had been nailed to a cross, executed for some strange kind of treason against the Roman Empire and the Jewish state, was now the King of the Universe? The man who had walked with them on dusty roads through Galilee and Samaria was now saying, “I, the Resurrected One, now have the last word everywhere!!” Because that is true, the place where you work or live or go to school has a formula to describe it, whether others recognize it or not. The formula goes like this: self + others + ethos or values of the place + policies (the rules where you work and live) + the purpose ... all of these are generally recognized as descriptive of the social settings of our world, but now you have to add + sin + evil + Jesus. He is not a sideline, an interesting or controversial topic of coffee break conversation. All authority has been granted to Him and He is Lord of everything that exists. So He is the King of kings at your school, at your place of work, in your neighbourhood, at your drug store or donut shop or dollar store. “I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth.” And because He’s the King of Everything, He asks us to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all of the commandments He had first given to those first disciples.

The second bracket is this: “And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Jesus is with us, not in some imaginary way, not in a dream state or in our imaginations, but in the real world where He is King, He is always with the believers. When you get in your car to go to work or to go to school or to go shopping, do you think, “I’m going out into the world where Jesus rules and He’s going with me”? Do you tell yourself, “I have nothing to fear today because Jesus knows everything I am going to face and He promises to be with me in it all.” The One who created, the One in whom all of creation holds together - as Paul writes in the first chapter of Colossians - the One who has complete authority over everything in earth and in heaven, has promised you and me that He will always be with us, even to the end of the age.

Here’s one way to look at these closing three verses of Matthew’s Gospel:

1. Jesus makes a great claim - that everything has been put under His feet, that He’s the Lord of all
2. Jesus gives a great commission - “Go out into the world and make disciples from every nation”
3. Jesus offers a great comfort - “I’ll always be there, with you, to the end of the age.”

Now, what are we supposed to do differently because we heard God’s word speak to us today?

1. First step: how can we get a bigger view of who Jesus is into our heads? That’s obviously important because we’re seeing from our text that Jesus has been put in charge of everything in heaven and on earth. AND He’s given us this great commission, AND He’s offered us the great comfort of knowing that He’s with us always, so it’s going to be important for us to have a view of Jesus that is real, that is true. We can’t think of Him just as our friend or just as our healer or just as our counsellor. He is those things of course, but He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

We can't hold a view of Jesus that makes Him seem as small or powerless or troubled or compromised as we are. He's great and good beyond our capacity to comprehend. And He's been put in charge of the universe that was created through Him and for Him, as Paul puts it in Colossians 1:16. This is our King. He is why we begin our services together by singing songs that honour Him and express our love and devotion to Him. When you think about Jesus, think really big and know that He's much bigger than that.

- 2.** The second key lesson from this passage is that Jesus has given us a mission that is broader than telling people the good news of God's salvation. He has given us the task of making disciples, of working alongside people who have some degree of spiritual hunger and helping them become kingdom people, genuine lovers of Jesus and followers of the way. Of course that means that we have to be involved in that process in our own lives, learning to follow where Jesus leads us. We can't take people where we haven't gone ourselves. But, as we become a people who know the Bible, who pray and listen for the Spirit's leading, who love people when it's hard, who do the things the Lord asks us to do, we will be more and better equipped to help others in that same journey. In the weeks ahead, as we open chapters 5-7 of Matthew's Gospel, our discipleship will be challenged - I give you fair warning - but we will also find things coming into clear focus and we will have the opportunity to learn more about how we can go and make disciples from all nations on earth. So, let's enter this season with hearts that are open to Jesus and eager to walk more closely with Him as we move through 2018.