

Discipleship

Isaiah 6:8–13, Acts 28:23–31

Paul is now in Rome. The Jewish community there has become acquainted with him. They have heard of what the Jews called “the sect of the Nazarenes”¹—that is, followers of Jesus of Nazareth—and were interested in hearing Paul personally. Luke tells us that “when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging.” Here were Jews who gathered in the synagogues on the Jewish Sabbath. Probably the majority of those who came, came out of curiosity. They did not come with the intention of becoming followers of Jesus of Nazareth, yet “they show some desire to learn.”² They were willing to hear Paul out. They were more open-minded than the Jews of Jerusalem who took a vow not to eat or drink till they had killed Paul.

And so we read that on the appointed day, “*many* came to him at his lodging.” Paul was awaiting trial before Caesar, permitted to dwell by himself with a soldier who guarded him. As he was confined, and couldn’t get out, the Lord brought the harvest to him—it was the Lord’s work. The Holy Spirit is the one that opens hearts and makes them responsive to the Word. Unless the Holy Spirit opens a person’s heart, that person remains blind and dead in trespasses and sins.

The gospel makes so much sense to us when we have been born again. We wonder why everybody doesn’t receive it. Here is the greatest gift that anyone could ever receive—entirely free, paid for by the precious blood of Christ. God offers us heaven. Why would not everyone jump at the chance to be reconciled to God, to have sins forgiven, to have assurance of heaven? There’s no better deal anywhere. Our Lord taught his disciples, “Freely ye have received, freely give.” The church offers the gospel without money and without price. “Whosoever will may come.” The problem is that the unregenerate heart does not *want* to come. The sinner is in love with self, in love with sin. In the words of Jesus, “Ye will not come to me that ye might have life.”³ What a tragedy! To have the gospel of the grace of God set before you, to know that it makes sense, to see that it is the perfect remedy for man’s sin and alienation, and yet to reject it!

So here is the apostle Paul, confined to his own rented house, chained to a Roman guard. He could not go anywhere. Yet the spirit of God is not confined. The spirit laid it on the hearts of “*many*” to come to him. If we offer ourselves as willing vessels, fit for the master’s use, he will be pleased to use us. One thing that all of us can do is pray for opportunities. If we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, he will be pleased to use us. You might be homebound, not able to get out. That

¹ Acts 24:5

² Calvin, commentary on Acts 28:21

³ John 5:40

doesn't hold the Holy Spirit back. There is no obstacle too great for him. He is sovereign. He *will* accomplish his purpose in bringing all the elect to Christ, and it will be a great number. In the closing words of Psalm 22, which we will sing at the end of the service today, "The ends of all the earth shall hear and turn unto the Lord in fear; all kindreds of the earth shall own and worship him as God alone." This is our prayer, this is our hope; there is no preventing the sovereign Holy Spirit from carrying it out.

Paul is not able to get out and preach to the crowds, but he doesn't remain idle. Though he doesn't get out to preach to the crowds, he uses his time to make disciples. Today we're going to consider the *task* of discipleship, the *method* of discipleship, and the *goal* of discipleship. First,

1. The task of discipleship

A disciple is a follower. Our Lord told us to go into all the world and make disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). This is the Great Commission. It is the church's standing orders until the Lord returns. A disciple is a learner. Jesus said, "Take My yoke upon you and *learn* from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." A rookie ox learns to plow by being yoked to an experienced ox. When the rookie gets all excited and wants to run and play, he can't run away because he is yoked to the experienced ox who just keeps moving ahead, plowing a straight row—steady, steady, steady. Eventually the rookie learns obedience, and the team begins to work together well. Christ wants us to get into the yoke with him. He is, as it were, the experienced ox; our need is to learn his ways. The way of Christ is right; he is the *way*, the truth and the life. Peter spoke for the disciples when he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life."⁴

Do you believe that? Do you believe that Christ alone has the words of eternal life? He is the Lamb of God who came into the world to save sinners by his death and resurrection. He lived a perfect life, perfectly keeping all God's commandments. This is what we call his active obedience. If he had messed up even once, then he would have been disqualified to be our sin bearer, for he would have had sin of his own. But he was the perfect Lamb, the sinless one. He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by him.

Every human being has a profound need to be a disciple of Christ. Paul said, "Follow me, as I follow Christ." All of us stand in need of human mentors, men and women that we look up to—fathers and mothers in the faith who can encourage us and disciple us and train us to be more faithful followers of Christ.

⁴ John 6:68

Ideally, this happens in the context of the church. Paul mentored Timothy and Titus. These were young men who looked up to Paul as their spiritual father in the faith. The church is our spiritual family—the family of God. John speaks of this in his first epistle, chapter 2: “I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one.” Little children, young men, fathers—these are the stages of discipleship.

The task of discipleship is necessary because we do not come into the world as fully-formed disciples of Christ. Little babies are adorable, but they can’t do much for themselves and they need to learn an awful lot. They need to learn to feed themselves, they need to learn their native tongue, they need to learn God’s truth. The Bible says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Children do not train themselves; they need loving parents who will train them, little by little, in age-appropriate ways.

Recently I have begun to pray that God would give wisdom to the parents of our covenant children to shepherd their minds and hearts, that they might be sanctuaries for our holy God. Parents, you are in a battle for your child’s heart. The world, the flesh and the devil are your enemies. They want to capture your child’s heart and turn him or her into a worshiper of idols.

The task of discipleship takes time and commitment; did you notice how the apostle Paul spent time with visitors from morning till evening? Paul invested a lot of time in making disciples. When we’re discipling someone, problems sometimes come up, where we have to drop what we’re doing and help our son or daughter in the faith. This is time-consuming, but it’s worth it.

If you belong to Christ, one of the best things you can do, outside of discipling your own family, is to get involved in the lives of others whom God in his providence sovereignly brings into your life. He brings individuals across our path for a reason. Do our acquaintances know that we are Christians? Have we shared with them the hope that is within us? Do we pray for them, that God might change their hearts and give them a hunger and thirst for the Gospel? To be successful in this life according to worldly standards, yet not have an impact on the lives of people around us, people whom we could have discipled. Here, then, is the task of discipleship. It is something that every Christian can have a part in by witnessing to those whom the Lord sovereignly brings into our lives. Child of God, take the first step and tell people around you that you are a follower of Christ, then pray that God will give you opportunities to share more. Now consider

2. The method of discipleship

We read that Paul “explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets.”

In the words of Calvin, “Paul took all that which he spoke of Christ out of the law and prophets.”

“The law and the prophets” is shorthand for the Hebrew Scriptures. Remember our Lord as he spoke with two disciples on the road to Emmaus late in the day on Resurrection Sunday. We read that “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”⁵ “The Law” is the law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. “The Prophets” is the rest of the Old Testament. Christian, you need to know your Old Testament. You need to read it with regularity. Why don’t we read it? Is it not because other things are more important to us? Is it not that our priorities are skewed? The Christian says with Job, “I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.” The word of God is a priceless treasure; it is the most important thing in the world. Yet many professing Christians go day after day, week after week, without opening its pages! We find time for all kinds of other things—our cell phones, the internet, magazines, books, hobbies, gaming—but we never find time for God’s word. It’s really a matter of priorities: what we spend time on is what is really important to us. At the final day will we hang our heads in shame and say, “Lord, you were never a priority to me”? He says, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness.” Christ and his kingdom must be first—must! That’s the command of Christ the King. If Christ is not first, then we must confess our sin and reform our ways. Discipleship begins with the Word—the Holy Scriptures.

Paul’s method of discipleship was to explain the Scriptures and testify of the kingdom of God. If we love the Lord Jesus Christ, then we will want to obey him. If we do not want to obey him, then that means we are not born again.

Today is Father’s Day. If you are a minor child intent on honoring your father, then you will want to obey him. If you get him a nice Father’s Day card telling him how much you love him, but do not obey him promptly and sincerely, then you really don’t love him. We should not love our fathers in word but in deed.

Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go. So Jesus asked, “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered.⁶ The second son said the right words: “I will, sir,” but he didn’t follow through. He was all talk. He didn’t obey his father.

God intends that the father be the head of the home. That whole idea sounds quite strange to modern ears, but it is true. Modern thought has been infected by

⁵ Luke 24:27

⁶ Matt. 21:28–31

egalitarianism: all members of the family are equal and have equal authority; to insist that children obey their parents is repressive; it stunts a child's creativity. Some argue that children ought to have the right to sue their parents. Others argue that schools ought to withhold certain information from a child's parents.

One mother found out that her 15-year-old identified as transgender at school after she saw a homework assignment with an unfamiliar name scrawled at the top. Her teenager acknowledged that teachers at the child's high school in southern California had for six months been letting the child—a biological female—use the boy's bathroom and calling the child by male pronouns. The mother was confused: Didn't the school need her permission, or at least need to tell her? It did not, a counselor explained, because the student did not want her parents to know. The child's rights trump the rights of the parent. This is contrary to Scripture.

The Bible teaches that fathers are to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. That's the word of God! The father (in an intact family) is responsible before God to teach his child about the Lord. If there's no father in the home, then that responsibility shifts to the mother. But it's clear that God never intended children to raise themselves. When parents abdicate their responsibility and allow their children to raise themselves, that is God's judgment upon a society. When God announced judgment on Judah and Jerusalem he said, "I will give *children* to be their princes, and *babes* shall rule over them. . . . The child will be insolent toward the elder, and the base toward the honorable" (Isa. 3:4–5). When children are insolent and do not obey, they are not honoring their parents. So obedience to Christ and to human fathers is part of discipleship; our responsibility daily is to obey Christ and do what he says.

We read that Paul "explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God." The KJV and ESV have "expounded" for "explained." To expound is to present and explain (an idea) systematically and in detail. Earlier we read how when Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos, "they took him unto them, and *expounded* unto him the way of God more perfectly."⁷ Aquila and Priscilla were discipling Apollos. They spent time with him and taught him the Holy Scriptures, presenting the Word systematically and in detail. True preaching is expounding and applying the biblical text. The church's message is all of Scripture. The church has no business teaching anything but what is taught in the Bible. The Bible is authoritative. Those who are hungry for the word come to church to hear the word of God and are disappointed and frustrated if they hear the ideas of men. Yesterday I received the message: "I love how you preach out of the Bible and reference Scripture verses." Here is a heart hungry for the gospel. Our deepest need is to know the God who has revealed himself in his word. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee

⁷ Acts 18:26 KJV

the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”⁸ Unless we know the Lord Jesus truly, we cannot have eternal life. How sad to have sat under the preaching of the Gospel but never to receive it! Finally, consider

3. The goal of discipleship

The goal of discipleship is to know Christ and become his fully-formed, mature disciple. As Paul said in another context, “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). We do not become fully-formed, mature disciples overnight. We need to grow in grace and knowledge. We need to bring all our thinking into conformity to Christ. We need to press toward the mark, toward the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Parents, are your children becoming mature, knowledgeable disciples of Christ? What steps are you taking to bring this about?

We read that on this occasion “some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved.” Both groups heard the same excellent teaching from the lips of the apostle Paul, but some were persuaded, while others disbelieved. The former responded in faith, while the latter didn’t respond in faith. What made the difference? The Spirit’s work of regeneration. All of us by nature are spiritually dead. The reason for this is the first sin of our forefather Adam. When Adam rebelled against God and ate the forbidden fruit, he brought sin and condemnation upon the whole human race. “As in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). Adam’s sin brought spiritual death upon all his posterity. God could have left us all to die in our sins, but he’s a merciful God. He doesn’t take pleasure in the death of the wicked. In the case of his elect, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, he sends his Spirit to regenerate their spiritually dead hearts and give them the knowledge of himself. God says, “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts.”⁹ In the day of his power he brings them from spiritual darkness to the light of the Gospel. All of a sudden the Christian message makes sense. The regenerated heart believes and follows Christ.

In the courtyard of his rented house Paul gave a warning to those that refused to turn to Christ: “The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying, ‘Go to this people and say: “Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.”’” Paul appeals to the testimony of Holy Scripture, the written record of the prophet Isaiah at his call, to prove that man is responsible for the sin of unbelief. Our responsibility is to believe the Gospel and come to Christ. But when we close our ears and eyes and

⁸ John 17:3

⁹ Jer. 31:33

hearts—when we refuse to submit to Christ—we add to our guilt. To die without Christ is to go to everlasting punishment in the fires of hell. Paul faithfully preaches Christ, as should we all. The last time we see Paul in the book of Acts, he’s preaching Christ.

Our job is to be disciples ourselves, to take on Christ’s yoke and learn from him, to be teachable. “The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits” (Jas. 3:17). Do these character qualities describe us? Are we growing in practical godliness, as well as knowledge? Do we practice purity? Are we peaceable and gentle? Are we open to reason, merciful? Let us grow in grace, as well as knowledge.

Our job is to *be* disciples and *make* disciples. Amen.