

Disciple: What It Means to Follow Jesus

Advance! * Matthew 16:13-19; 28:16-20

Introduction

Well, today is a huge, huge day for us. This morning we are kicking off a brand new series on discipleship, and I can tell you that I am more excited about this series than any I have ever been a part of. I promise you that this is no exaggeration and hope that by the end of the message you will feel the same way. But I realize if that is going to be the case we have a lot of work to do, because right now you may not consider the topic of discipleship to be all that big of a deal. But I agree with Dallas Willard when he says:

The greatest issue facing the world today with all its heartbreaking needs is whether those who by profession or culture are identified as Christians, if they will become disciples, students, apprentices, practitioners of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from Him how to live the life of the kingdom of heaven into every corner of human existence. Will they break out of the churches to be His church, to be His mighty force for good on earth, drawing the churches after them toward the eternal purposes of God and on its own scale, there is no greater issue facing the individual human being, Christian or not.

This issue is so important that for the better part of the last nine months your church leadership has been prayerfully searching the Scriptures, attempting to discern God's direction in regards to what it truly means to follow Jesus and the resulting implications for how we do ministry at Harmony Bible Church. And the series that we are about to embark on will detail for you what we have found and what we believe God is calling us to focus upon in the days ahead. So, I hope you can see just how significant this series truly is. As I have said on numerous occasions over the last year, my general philosophy of ministry is to look to God's Word for what we are supposed to do, and then to go out and do it. That's all there is to it. And that is what we are going to do over the next eight weeks. We are going to look at what the Bible has to say about discipleship, and then with the Holy Spirit's help, we are going to do it. Make sense?

Let's get started then by attempting to answer two huge questions that will serve as the foundation for everything else we are going to talk about. Number one, what is God doing? And number two; what does God want *us* to do?

What is God Doing?

Let's start by trying to figure out what God is doing. To do so, turn with me to Matthew 16. While your turning, let me ask...do you ever wonder what God is up to? I mean do you ever get confused about what is going on and why things happen the way that they do? Do you ever look at the world we live in, with all the pain, hurt, and chaos and just shake your head in confusion? I imagine for most of us, the answer is yes. I know it is for me. I mean, from our point of view, things don't look so great, do they? The economy is terrible, crime is rampant, violence is at an all-time high, and our families are in crisis. I don't know if you have watched any of the national political conventions over the last couple of weeks, and I know many of you have because I have read your witty political commentary on Facebook, but its obvious from viewing just a portion of these events that our country is in disarray. And of course that doesn't include the difficulties of the rest of the world, most notably in such places as Syria, Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan, just to name a few.

To make matters worse, the one organization that has the answer to the world's problems is struggling mightily itself. If you are not clear what organization this is, I am referring to the church. All around us Christians are fighting amongst themselves, church leaders are falling into sin, Christian families are falling apart, and churches are closing their doors for good. And you don't even have to go outside of SE Iowa to see this. It's not a pretty picture, either inside or outside of the church. And so, we might rightfully ask, what exactly is God doing?

Well, the answer to this question is found in Matthew 16. And I pray that this passage will give you great hope this morning. Yes, our world is in a mess, but God is in control. God is working. God has a plan. And it's essential that we understand His plan. So what is that plan? We find it here in Matthew 16:13-19:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" [14] And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." [15] He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" [16] Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." [17] And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
(Matthew 16:13-19 ESV)

Now, I have to admit up front that this is perhaps the most controversial passage in all of Scripture. But for the most part I want to avoid the controversy because I honestly believe that the devil has used it to distract us from the massive truth the Holy Spirit is trying to teach us here. So, in that light, let me simply point out three things from this passage that answer the question *What is God Doing?*

1. God is building his Church.

Number one, the thing that God is doing is building his church. Look at verse 18:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Friends, the thing that God is doing today is building his church. And let me be clear about what Jesus means by church. This is one of only two times the word church is found in the Gospels. Jesus uses it here and two chapters later in Matthew 18. The Greek word is *ekklesia*, and here it refers not to a specific church in a specific location, but rather to all true believers of all time. Jesus is referring to a group of people, a group of people who have been chosen by God to be his church. So very simply get this, what God is doing is calling out, growing, building, however you want to say it, his people. Listen, God is not building a building. This facility that we sit in today is not the church. The people in this room who have been called out by God to be his people are the church. The church isn't brick and mortar. It's people. And this is what God is doing. This is what he is building. God is not building a denomination. He is not building a parachurch organization. He is not building a missions organization. He is not building a school or a university. He is not building a business. He is not building a country or a nation. He is not building a political party. He is building his church. So, what is God doing? He is building his church.

2. God is building his church through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah.

The second thing we need to see here is how God is building his church. And this is where the controversy comes in, specifically in regards to whom the rock is that Jesus refers to in verse 18. Some say the rock is Peter, some say it is Jesus, and some say it is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. I actually believe that in some sense all three are correct.

Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles, with Jesus being the chief cornerstone. So, in a very real way both the apostles and Jesus are the foundation on which God is building the church. That said, here in this passage the emphasis is on Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah. Let's look at the context

a little more. In verse 13 Jesus asks the disciples what people are saying about him – he asks them what the word on the street is regarding who he is. In verse 14 the disciples respond by saying that there are various opinions. Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Now, it's important to note what people are saying and what they aren't saying. They are saying that Jesus is a popular guy, a good teacher, perhaps a prophet in his own right. Much the same as what people say about Jesus today. But what they aren't saying is that he is God come in the flesh. They aren't saying he is the long-awaited Messiah. And so in verse 15, Jesus turns his question to the disciples and says, ok, that's what everyone else is saying, but *who do you say that I am?* Now, we can't see this in our English translations, but *you* in the Greek is` emphatic. Jesus is asking the disciples a very direct, personal question. It's kind of like this. I can come up to Kevin and ask him what people here at Harmony think about me. And he might give me a general response that would allow him to safely avoid any direct confrontation with me. He might choose just to share the good things he is hearing about me. But if I say what do you think about me Kevin, then I am getting very direct and personal. There would be no way for Kevin to avoid telling me what he personally thinks of me. And with this direct question Jesus brings the disciples to a crucial moment. So what is their response? In verse 16 Peter speaks for the group and says:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Your translation might have *Messiah* instead of Christ. The words are synonymous. And when Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, he isn't just affirming that he is great prophet and teacher, but that he is much more than that. Peter is declaring that Jesus is God's chosen prophet, priest, and king who has come to save His people and establish his kingdom here on earth.

And Jesus' response in verse 17 shows that Peter's answer is correct. Which leads to verse 18, where Jesus goes on to say that it is on this rock that he will build his church. Now, here in the Greek there is a play on words. The Greek word for Peter is *petros*, which means stone, and the Greek word for rock is *petra*, which means a rocky cliff. What Jesus is pointing out here is that yes, Peter and the other disciples have a role in the building of the church, but the primary rock, the main foundation upon which the church is built is the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah.

This is further clarified by verse 19. Look at it:

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Now, if we were to travel to Rome today and visit the Vatican, one of the many things we would notice would be the many statues and pictures of Peter where he is holding a giant key. Think of a giant key that a mayor might give out to his city. This is also the reason for all of the jokes and stories about Peter being at the pearly gates and allowing or denying access to heaven. But that is not what is in view here. The keys here symbolize access. In other words, the keys give access to something. Here in verse 19, the keys give access to the kingdom of heaven. And what is the key? The key is the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The disciples have the keys because they know the truth about Jesus. In other words, what is necessary for someone to enter into the kingdom of heaven? What is necessary in order for someone to be saved? They must believe, like Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And as the disciples declare this truth, they give people access to the kingdom.

Now, I know that we have gone round and round a little bit, but here is the point. God is building his church and the way that he is doing it is through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. It is both the rock upon which the church is built and the key that gives access into God's kingdom.

My friends, it is impossible to overstate how significant this proclamation truly is. The most important question that every single one of us faces is what do we do with Jesus? And so I ask you pointedly today, do you agree with Peter? Do you agree that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? Who do you say that Jesus is? Do you realize that absolutely everything depends upon your answer to this question? I urge you today to cry out with Peter; Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

But let's also consider this from a corporate standpoint. God has established that the means by which he is going to build his church is through our proclamation of the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Listen; there is no other way to build the church. Oh yes, we can build a nice building. Yes, we can draw a crowd. Yes, we can get a lot of people to come to our services and events. But the only way to build the church, the only way for lost people to become God's people, the only way to populate heaven is by declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

3. Nothing can stop God from building his church.

Ok, one more important point in Matthew 16, one that I hope will be a very empowering truth for Harmony Bible Church. Here it is: nothing can stop God from building his church. Verse 18 one more time:

On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I have entitled this message Advance because of this point right here. Brothers and sisters, I wonder if we truly believe what Jesus says in verse 18. Do we really believe that God will build his church through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah? Do we really believe that as we go into a lost and dying world and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah that God will bring sinners to himself and build his church? Do we really believe that nothing can stop us?

If so, it is time to get in the game and quit sitting on the sidelines. It is time to quit circling the wagons, just hoping to make it through until Jesus comes. It is time for us to stop being on the defensive and to start living on mission.

You know, for some reason we have tended to look at this verse and think that the church is under attack by hell and that Jesus is promising that we will be able to ward off the attack. That is not what Jesus is saying here. I mean, just think about the imagery. Are gates offensive or defensive weapons? Defensive. And who has the gates? Hell does. So who does Jesus say is on defense here? Hell. By default that means that who is on the offense? The church is!

The word hell can also be translated *Hades* and refers to the place of the dead. And in a real sense the place of the dead is this world. The world is dead in its trespasses and sins. And what Jesus is saying is that as the church boldly proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the gates of hell will not be able to stop us from breaking through and rescuing dead people. Do you get this? That as we boldly proclaim the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the Holy Spirit will use that proclamation to save people and bring them from death unto life. So friends, it's time to change our strategy. It's time to boldly proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah and to break down the gates of hell and rescue those who are perishing. It's not time to retreat; it's a time to advance!

So, let me summarize all of this to make sure we are on the same page. What is God doing? He is building his church. How is he doing it? Through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. What can stop it? Absolutely nothing.

What Does God Want Us to Do?

Now, we could stop here, but you know what, it isn't enough simply to understand what God is doing. We must also understand what we are called to do, and how we are called to do it. We get a little picture here in Matthew 16 of what that is. We have to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. But there is more to it than that. So, let's now turn to Matthew 28, where Jesus gives us the details on what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to do it.

Take a look at verse 16-20:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. [17] And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. [18] And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(Matthew 28:16-20 ESV)

One commentator says that this passage is the climax and major focal point not only of Matthew's gospel but also of the entire New Testament and that it is not an exaggeration to say that it is the focal point of all of Scripture.¹ So, we are dealing with absolutely crucial stuff right here.

The problem, however, is that it is also perhaps the most familiar passage in the Bible. You have likely heard more messages from Matthew 28 than from any other passage. And so my concern is that you will come to this passage thinking that you've got this, that you know what it means and this will simply be repetition for you. My prayer is that you will see these verses with fresh eyes and that God will stir something great within you this morning. Please know that although this passage is familiar, it is often misunderstood and even more often misapplied, or ignored all together. So, please allow God's Word to speak to your heart today.

This passage is, of course, known as the Great Commission. Jesus has just died, rose from the dead, and spent 40 days appearing to and teaching his followers. And now in the closing verses of Matthew he comes to his disciples one final time and gives them instruction on what they are to do in light of his upcoming departure.

Now, a surface reading of this passage would seem to indicate that Jesus tells his disciples that they are to do four things, right? They are to go, they are to baptize, they are to make disciples, and they are to teach their disciples everything he had commanded them. However, there really is only one command in this passage, one primary thing that Jesus is telling his disciples to do. There is one main verb, with three participles modifying or explaining the verb. And the one command, the one thing that the disciples are to give themselves to is making disciples. Let me be very clear. There is one thing that we are called to do as followers of Christ. There is one thing we

¹ MacArthur, John, p. 329. (2001). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

are called to do as a church. We are called to make disciples. There are a lot of things that we can do, there are a lot of things we might do, but there is only one thing we must do. We must make disciples.

If you are a follower of Jesus, if you call yourself a Christian, if you claim the name of Christ, disciple making is for you. Let me put it bluntly; if you are a believer here today, you are either a disciple maker or you are disobedient. There just isn't any way around it. This right here is the mission that Jesus gave to his followers 2,000 years ago, and this mission has been given to every person who bears the name of Christ.

Now, we are going to talk a lot about discipleship in this series, so this morning I just want to give a short overview of disciple making from verses 19-20. When you think of disciple making, think of three words. A disciple maker goes, a disciple maker baptizes, and a disciple maker teaches.

First, a disciple maker goes. Look at verses 18-19:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

The Greek literally reads *as you are going*. This means that disciple making is a lifestyle as well as a location.

From a lifestyle perspective, it is something that should just naturally be a part of who we are and what we do. We should be disciple makers wherever we are at - at the grocery store, at the football game, at school, at work, in our neighborhoods, and first and foremost at home. We should all be making disciples as we go about our normal, everyday lives.

At the same time, you will note that Jesus says we are to make disciples of all nations. The key word here is *all*. The reality today is that there are somewhere around 2 billion people on this earth comprising some 6,000 nations who have never heard the name of Jesus even one single time. And so we must make disciples here as we go about our lives, but we must also prioritize the making of disciples among the nations that have never heard. We should make disciples both here and there. This is why, by the way, that we have staff members dedicated to lead each of these areas. Pastor Matt Yaley leads our Global Disciple Making Ministries and Jeremy Hess leads our Community Disciple Making Ministries. Both are essential, both are necessary, both must be key focal points for our church and for every single one of us. So, a disciple maker goes.

But not only does a disciple maker go, but a disciple maker also baptizes. Verse 19 again:

Go therefore and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Here's how it works. As we go, whether to Danville or Darfur, Burlington or Belgium, Mediapolis or Malaysia, we proclaim the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. As we do, the Holy Spirit will use the proclamation of this truth to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and when he does we baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now let me say that I think Jesus has more in view here than simply the physical process of baptism. I think that when he says baptize he is including evangelism, conversion, and identification with Christ. In other words, making disciples includes sharing the gospel, it includes helping those we evangelize to understand what it means to follow Christ, and it includes teaching them that baptism is an expression of the fact that they have died to self and have become a follower of Jesus Christ. When Jesus refers to baptizing he isn't simply talking about giving someone a tract and on the off chance that they respond dunking them in water. He is referring to a process whereby we share our faith, lead people to an understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him, and lead them to identify their life with Christ's.

So, a disciple maker goes. A disciple maker baptizes. And finally, a disciple maker teaches. Verse 20:

Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

There are a couple of key words here. The first is *all*. We are to teach those we are discipling all of the things that Jesus has commanded us. This, by the way, includes the command to make disciples. We must make disciples who know how to make other disciples.

The second key word is *observe*. This means to obey, to live out. Listen, disciple making isn't simply imparting knowledge, it is imparting a way of life. This means that disciple making is time-intensive and highly relational. It means that disciple making can't happen just one hour or two hours a week on Sunday morning. It means that disciple making can't happen in large group settings. Listen, what we are doing today, right here and right now is not sufficient to make disciples. It's a start, and a good one at that. But if we are going to make disciples it will require having someone in our lives who we can help to learn and obey everything that Jesus has commanded.

Now, let's just be honest for a minute. I say this in love, but I think if we were honest we would have to admit that we have not done a very good job of following Jesus' command here in Matthew 28. Can we admit this? We have built nice buildings, we have run effective programs, we have held nice events where people have been encouraged and had a good time. We have done quite a few things well. But the truth is that on an individual and corporate basis we have struggled to proclaim Jesus as Messiah, baptize those who have responded, and disciple them to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. I'm not saying, by the way, that there hasn't been fruit born for the Kingdom. I'm not saying that people haven't been saved and discipled. What I am saying is that there hasn't been nearly enough of it. It seems to me that we have allowed good things to get in the way of the best thing.

Now, perhaps you might think that I am not being very charitable. And maybe you are right. But let me ask you to do this. I'd like you to write down on your handout the names of the people whom you have discipled in the last year. If you need to go back a little further, that's ok. Go back five years, or 10 years. If you need to, include all the people you have ever discipled. You know what my experience tells me? I really can't tell, but I imagine that there is very little writing going on right now. My experience is that most Christians have never discipled even one single person.

Why don't we make disciples?

And this problem weighs heavy on my heart, and I hope that it weighs heavy on yours as well. As a result I've spent some time considering why this is the case. Why are so few Christians engaged in the central mission that Jesus gave to his followers? What is the problem? While there are numerous factors, some of which we will talk about in this series, I think two stand above the rest, two that are addressed by Jesus here in Matthew 28. First, we don't understand Jesus' power. Look again at verse 18:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, Go therefore and make disciples."

Before Jesus commissions us to make disciples, he makes it clear that he has the authority to do so. The word authority means the right and power to do something.² And so Jesus is saying that he has every right and all the power to do whatever he pleases both here on earth and in heaven. And what does he please to do? He pleases to send his disciples out to make more disciples. He pleases to offer those who have rebelled against his rule the opportunity to willingly submit to his authority.

² Piper, John. 11/14/82. *Go and Make Disciples, Baptizing Them...*, desiringgod.org. ©2012 Desiring God Foundation

Now, where does this power come from? It comes from the fact that he is the God who took on human flesh, stepped into this mess of a world, lived a perfect life, suffered and died on the cross for our sins, and three days later rose again. As a result we saw in Philippians 2, that God the Father has bestowed on Jesus a name that is above every name, a name at which one day every knee will bow and tongue will confess that He is Lord. Listen, one day every single person who has ever lived will understand the power that Jesus has. It's absolutely going to happen. Disciple making is simply giving people the opportunity to bow and confess willingly here and now before Jesus comes and they have to do so under compulsion.

So don't miss this. Jesus is in charge. We might think we are in charge, or someone else is in charge, but Jesus is really the one who is in charge. He is our Savior, our King, and our Lord. And he has given his followers a mission to complete, and his power stands completely behind that mission.

A second reason we don't engage in making disciples is that we don't understand Jesus' presence. Look at what the end of verse 20 says:

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

You see, not only does Jesus have the authority to do whatever he wants, but he also promises to use that authority to help us accomplish the task he has called us to.

The word *behold* is used frequently in the New Testament to call attention to something of special importance. Jesus is basically saying to the disciples, pay special attention to what I am about to say. I, the one with all authority in heaven and earth, will be with you at all times until the task is complete. In other words, we don't have to go this alone. We don't even have to do most of the work. We simply need to obey and trust that what Jesus has promised is true. That he does have all authority, and that when we faithfully proclaim him as the Messiah and seek to make disciples, he will always be with us to bring people to himself and build his church. Listen, listen, listen. The greatest thing about all of this is that Jesus has offered us the opportunity to be involved in the one thing that will last. The one thing that cannot fail. The one thing that has a 100% success rate. And that is building his church by making disciples.

So, in closing, let me tell you that I recognize that this idea of making disciples might be overwhelming. It's very likely that most of the people in this room have never been discipled themselves. And so much of the rest of what we will talk about in this series will simply be studying what a disciple looks like and how we can a) be a disciple and b) make disciples. My goal over the next seven weeks is to teach you how to be a

disciple and how to make disciples. So, if you aren't sure where to start or what to do with what you have heard today, that's ok. Just come back next week and we will figure this out together.

But for today, I just want us to get this. What is God doing – he is building his church. And what is our role in this? We are called to go and make disciples by proclaiming the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, baptizing those who respond, and then teaching them everything that Jesus has commanded us. Let's pray.

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