

## **Disciple: What It Means to Follow Jesus**

### **Discipleship in the Local Church \* Various Passages**

As you know, today we are going to wrap up our Disciple series, which means that next Sunday we will be moving on to something new. That being the case, I'd like to give you a heads up on where we are headed next. I mentioned a few weeks ago that we will be studying the Gospel of Matthew soon, and we will begin that series on the first Sunday in December. It's going to be a great way to kick off the Christmas season and I am very much looking forward to that study. And by the way, you can expect that we will be in Matthew for most, if not all, of 2013. Now, I am sure you realize that still leaves us with the entire month of November, and so I want to let you know that next month is going to be a little different. Over the next four Sundays we will be focusing on some of the basics, including personal fellowship with Christ, baptism, communion, and thanksgiving. November is going to be a great month for our church family, and I hope that you all will make it a priority to join together for worship.

Ok, with that said, let's get to today's message in which we are going to wrap up our Disciple series. And before we do, let me say thank you for your response to what we have studied so far. I know that we have talked about some challenging matters over the last seven weeks, but it has been very encouraging to see your hunger for the Word of God and your desire to obey and take the steps necessary to truly follow Christ. I have especially been encouraged with numerous stories of how people in our congregation are beginning to live in community and attempting to share their faith. Just this week I found out that one of our large family units has decided to begin to meet together to fellowship and study God's Word. And all I have to say to that is yes, yes, yes! That's what it's about and that is what we need to pursue together in the days ahead.

Now, this morning I want to wrap up the series by doing two things. First, I want to do a careful review of the most important things we have discussed. The second thing I want to do is talk about how we go about pursuing disciple making as a local church. In just a moment we are going to go to Scripture once again and see how God desires the local church to function in order to pursue the mission that he has given us.

So, let's begin with a careful review. No need to take notes on this part as you can simply follow along in the handout or on the screen.

We started the series by answering the foundational question, 'What is God doing?' And in Matthew 16 we found that the thing that God is doing is building his church through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah.

We then went on to answer another foundational question, 'What is our role in what God is doing?' and in Matthew 28 we found that our role is to do what? Our role is to make disciples.

If you will humor me here just a little bit, I want to stress one last time that these really are the most important questions in the entire world. There really isn't anything more important than understanding what God is doing and what he wants us to do. So, what is God doing? Building his church through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. And what is our role in this? Our role is to make disciples.

With that foundation set we then began to talk about what it means to be a disciple. This is significant because if we are going to make disciples, we really need to understand what a disciple is. And so we went back to Matthew 16, where Jesus tells us that if we want to be a disciple we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. I think that for many of us this was the most challenging message in the series, because we found Jesus' idea of discipleship to be much different than ours tends to be.

Now, with this as a starting point for an understanding of what a disciple is, we then studied the three primary characteristics of a disciple. Here is the definition that we have returned to over and over again:

*A disciple is someone who **worships** Christ in all of life, lives in **community** with other disciples, and lives on **mission** to make more disciples.*

Worshiping Christ in all of life means that worship is 360; it's not something we do once a week when we enter this building but rather something we pursue every single minute of every single day.

Living in community means that we recognize that when we make a commitment to following Jesus, we make a commitment to do so with everyone else who is following Him.

Finally, living on mission means to join Jesus in His mission to seek and save the lost.

Now, that leaves us with only one thing to discuss, one more piece of the puzzle to fill in. We need to consider how God has designed this to work in a local church. A key part of this series has been the fact that following Christ isn't something we do on our own; we do it together with other disciples. Specifically, we do it within the relationships we have in a local church. And we have talked quite a bit about our

relationships with other disciples, but one thing we haven't discussed is the relationship that we are called to have with church leaders. Therefore, I'd like to take some time to explore the role that church leaders have in making disciples.

Now, in the last two weeks I have hammered home the fact that everyone in the church is a minister and a missionary. Ministry isn't just for pastors and mission isn't just for those we call missionaries. Ministry and mission are for all of us. That said, God does desire for some members of a local church to serve as leaders, and while these leaders are ministers and missionaries like everyone else, they do have a unique role in facilitating ministry and mission. So, let's take some time to discuss the role of church leadership in disciple making.

## **Church Leadership and Disciple Making**

The New Testament clearly teaches that the church is to be lead by two groups of men called elders and deacons. Sometimes this is confusing because it appears as if there is a third office of pastor. But in Scripture the terms elder and pastor are interchangeable, meaning that they are not two offices but one. This means that here at Harmony all of our pastors are elders and all of our elders are pastors. Some of these men are paid to serve at the church full time, such as myself, but most elders are laymen.

Anyways, the primary responsibility of the elders is to shepherd the flock. In a minute we are going to look in depth at what this means, but for now, simply understand that the role of elders is to lead and care for the church body. Deacons, on the other hand, have the role of assisting the elders, primarily through providing leadership to the serving ministries of the church. On a practical level, this means that deacons lead the ministries that care for the facilities, finances, and benevolent needs of the church. That said I do want to be clear that much of what we are going to talk about in regards to elders also applies to deacons. So, even though I will primarily refer to elders in the rest of this message, please consider much if not all of it to be true of deacons as well.

Ok, with that understanding, let's now talk about how the New Testament instructs elders to shepherd the flock. We will start by taking our Bibles and turning to 1 Peter 5. There is no one single passage that gives the job description for elders, so we are going to look at a number of different passages. In these passages we are going to see that elders are called to serve in three primary ways: elders lead the flock, elders feed the flock, and elders equip the flock.

### **1. Elders lead the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-4)**

Let's start with leading the flock in 1 Peter 5, picking up in verse 1:

*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: [2] shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; [3] not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. [4] And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4 ESV)*

In verse two Peter tells us that shepherding the flock means exercising oversight. This is the most basic responsibility of an elder and refers to watching over the members of the church to assess their condition so they can be properly cared for, fed and equipped.

A key phrase in this passage is *in your charge* in verse 3, which indicates that specific elders are entrusted with specific members to oversee. And I hope you see the significance of this. The Chief Shepherd in verse 4 is Jesus Christ, and he has entrusted specific elders in specific local churches with specific members for them to shepherd. That's what Peter is trying to drive home here.

Peter also tells the elders how they are supposed to lead. They are to do it willingly and not under compulsion, eagerly and not out of greed, and as examples rather than domineering. And I'd like to key on this last part for just a moment. I think it is important to point out that when we are looking for men to serve as elders, we need to look for men who lead by example. God does not desire for his church to be lead by men who say one thing and do another. And I have to say that this has been a huge point of discussion for your elders over the last 10 months as we have discussed and considered these matters of discipleship. Over and over again we have said that if we are going to call the church to be disciples and make disciples, than first and foremost we have to be disciples and disciple makers ourselves.

I would guess that a large majority of us have been a part of churches where the leaders preached one thing and did another. And we just simply can't have that here. We must practice what we preach. Listen, your elders aren't perfect. We will never perfectly live out what we preach. But we do have to set the example, and that is what we are going to attempt to do in regards to discipleship in the days ahead. A huge part of what it means to be an elder is to lead the members of the church in the pursuit of being disciples and making disciples. That's what elders do, and that is what your elders are committed to do in the days ahead.

## **2. Elders feed the flock. (1 Timothy 4:13, 2 Timothy 4:2, Titus 1:9)**

So, elders lead the flock in pursuit of discipleship. And a primary way in which they do so is through feeding the flock. Of all the functions of an elder, this is the one that is most often referred to in the New Testament. I have said before that if you read through the pastoral epistles of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus there is no way that you can avoid seeing that the number one thing an elder is called to do is teach the Word of God. Some examples include Titus 1:9, where Paul is giving the qualifications for a man to serve as an elder:

*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9 ESV)*

Or, 1 Timothy 4:

*[13] Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. [14] Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. [15] Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. [16] Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:13-16 ESV)*

Perhaps the clearest example of all is 2 Timothy 4:

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom. [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:1-2 ESV)*

So, it is very clear that elders are to feed the flock by teaching God's Word. But what is the purpose of feeding the flock? What's the goal? Paul tells us in Colossians 1:28:

*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (Colossians 1:28 ESV)*

The goal of teaching is disciple making; elders feed the flock so that every member of the body might become mature in Christ.

### **3. Elders equip the flock. (Ephesians 4:11-16)**

So, elders lead the flock, elders feed the flock and last but not least, elders equip the flock. Take your Bibles and turn with me to Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4 is a critical passage on the relationship between church leaders and church members. We are going to pick up in verse 11 where Paul is in the middle of explaining to the Ephesians that when Christ ascended back to heaven he gave gifts to his church. Look at the passage:

*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, [14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16 ESV)*

So, Paul is saying that Christ gave the church gifts. In other passages he details more of these gifts, but here he focuses on the New Testament offices of apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. And while the ESV seems to indicate that shepherds and teachers are two different groups more than likely this simply refers to the office of elder. The main point I want to bring out here, however, is the purpose of these gifts. Why did Christ give them to the church? Verse 12 says to equip the saints. *Equip* means *to make someone completely adequate or sufficient for something*.<sup>1</sup> And what are elders to equip the saints for? For ministry. Once again, who are the ministers in the church? We are all ministers. And the role of the elders is to equip all of us to do ministry. Are you beginning to see how God desires for all of this to work? He wants everyone in the church to be a minister, and has given the gift of elders to equip everyone to do so.

I think it will be helpful to look again at what the result of this ministry is. Pick up at the end of verse 12:

*... for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, [14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and held together by*

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<sup>1</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (679). New York: United Bible Societies.

*every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

The result of elders equipping and members ministering is the growth of the body into maturity. Elders equip, members minister, and the body grows.

So, elders lead, elders feed, and elders equip. I think we can all agree that this is an absolutely huge role. And I think we can also be thankful that God has blessed us with a large group of men who are committed to shepherding in this way.

## **Application**

All right, now that we have that, let's talk application. What does this mean for Harmony Bible Church? Well, I think it means two things.

### **1. Commit to a life a discipleship.**

Number one, we all need to commit to a life of discipleship. To commit to worshiping Christ in all of life, living in community with other disciples, and living on mission to make more disciples. We have seen very clearly over the last eight weeks that this is what it means to follow Jesus. We now know, not only what it means, but also how to do it. The only thing left to decide is whether or not we are actually going to do it. Are we going to seek to worship Christ in all of life? Are we going to begin to live in community with one another? Are we going to live on mission to make more disciples? You know, I really believe that many of us today are at a crossroads. Many of us today have come to a James 1 moment. James 1:22-25 says this:

*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. [23] For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. [24] For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. [25] But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22-25 ESV)*

You see we have a choice to make. We have looked intently into God's Word and clearly seen what it has to say about being a disciple. We have looked in the mirror of Scripture and recognized that there are things in our lives that are missing from the picture of what it means to follow Jesus. And so now we have a choice. It's a choice to ignore what we have seen and walk away unchanged, or to act on what we have learned and receive the blessings that come from following Jesus. Which one will it be for you?

Now, perhaps you want to act on what you have learned but you are not sure where to start. And I would encourage that the best thing you can do is to begin to live in community with other believers. Start getting together outside of Sunday morning with other believers for the purpose of encouraging one another towards mission and worship. Listen, this stuff is hard. It's not easy. I can guarantee you that the devil does not want to see you engaged in these things and will fight you the whole way. And if you try to go it alone you will likely fail. But if you lock arms with other believers and continually challenge one another, encourage one another, and pray for one another, I know that through the power of the Holy Spirit you can do it. So, get into community today and use that as a launching pad for worship and mission.

## **2. Allow Harmony's leaders to shepherd you in pursuit of discipleship. (Hebrews 13:7, 17)**

The second thing we need to do is allow Harmony's leaders to shepherd us. I hope you have already gotten this as I have explained the role of church leadership. But just in case it needs a little more clarity, let's go to one more passage, Hebrews 13.

Hebrews is a wonderful, Christ-centered letter written to a group of struggling Christians in Rome. The letter was written during a great time of persecution when many Christians were either leaving the faith or seriously considering doing so. And therefore a major theme of Hebrews is persevering in the faith. And the author tells his readers that one of the primary means to doing so is to allow the church leaders to shepherd them. Look at what he writes in 17:

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*  
(Hebrews 13:17 ESV)

- **Church leaders are responsible for the members God has given them to lead.**

I want to make two points from this text. One, church leaders are responsible for the members God has given them to lead. I have to tell you that as an elder this is a verse that haunts me. Shepherding God's people is very serious business. In fact, I can think of nothing more serious than the fact that one day I will stand before the Lord and give an account for how I have watched over the members of this congregation. Harmony, you need to know that all of your leaders feel the same way about this responsibility. In fact, this passage has been at the center of our yearlong discussions about how God is calling us to lead this congregation. And you need to know that

every single one of your leaders is committed to watching over the souls of the members of this church.

- **Church members are responsible to follow their leaders.**

Now, I hope you are encouraged by the fact that your elders desire to care for you. I hope that you think this is a good thing. And I also hope that you recognize that if they are going to do so, something is required from you. And that is the second thing I want to point out. While leaders are responsible to watch over our souls, we are responsible to allow them to do so. Another way to put this is that as our leaders lead, we are responsible to follow them.

Now, I know that there are few words in the English language that are less palatable today than the word submit. One of the reasons this is true is that many of us have experienced church leaders abusing their authority and leading in a way that was unfit to be followed. But, if you will allow, I'd like to give you four reasons why we should follow our leaders.

### **1) We should follow because God's Word commands us to.**

Number one, God's Word commands us to. These are not my words, they aren't the elders, they are God's. We might like it or we might not, but that really isn't the point. Ultimately, the issue of submission to any authority is about submission to Christ. To follow church leaders is to follow Christ, and not to follow church leaders is to rebel against Christ. Of course, there is a caveat I need to add here. We are only called to follow as long as the leaders are following the Lord; if they are not, we should not follow. Don't ever follow your leaders into sin.

### **2) We should follow because it brings our leaders joy.**

The second reason we should follow is that it brings our leaders joy.

Look at the verse again:

*Let them do this with joy and not with groaning.*

This is pretty simple, right? When members willingly follow their leaders, it gives the leaders joy. And I think I have been at this long enough to say, great joy. I told you a few weeks ago that I love my job and I am having a lot of fun. Do you want to know one of the big reasons why? It's because God has blessed with me with a group of people who seem like they want to be lead and are eager to follow. Maybe you have

me fooled, but that's at least the sense that I get. This is, of course, tied to the third reason we should follow our leaders, and that is, that it is for our good.

### **3) We should follow because it is for our good.**

Back to the verse on more time:

*Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

Here's the point. When members don't follow, leaders grieve rather than rejoice, which ends up not only hurting the leaders, but the members as well. Let me ask you, would you rather be lead by men that rejoice or men that groan? Hopefully we would all choose rejoice. Well, you have a big part in this. When you allow your leaders to watch over and care for you, it will result in their joy, which will very likely result in your joy as well. See how it works?

### **4) We should follow for the sake of Jesus Christ.**

Ok, one last one, and this is the most important one of all. We should follow our leaders for the sake of Jesus Christ.

For this I want to go to Acts. You don't need to turn there, as the verse will be on the screen. In Acts 20 Paul has gathered the Ephesian elders for a final face-to-face meeting, and he has this to say to them about shepherding the flock:

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28 ESV)*

Brothers and sisters, leading and following in the church is such a vital issue because the church is precious to God. And we have to get this, because it is at the very center of why all of this really matters. Paul tells the Ephesian elders that they need to care for God's church because God cared enough to send his Son so that there could be a church. The thing that gives the church its significance isn't the leaders, it isn't the members, and it isn't even our mission. It is the fact that we are precious to God. So precious that He was willing to send His Son to die so that we could be His church, His people. It's unfortunate and heartbreaking that so many people today have such a nonchalant view of the church. Like they could take it or leave it. Because that certainly isn't God's view of the church. Yes, the church has its problems. Yes, church leaders are sinful human beings who often make mistakes. Yes, church members often are difficult and anything but Christ-like. Yes, here at Harmony we are not perfect and we

never will be here on this earth. But, to God this church is precious. To God this church is special. To God this church is worth it. And therefore it should be to us as well. Here's how we express that the church is valuable to us: leaders shepherd the flock in making disciples, and members follow their lead.

Now, you may have noticed that I have repeatedly used the phrase "church member" in this message. And this brings up an interesting point because many of you here today are not members of Harmony. So, what does this mean for you? Well, we would strongly encourage you to become a member. The truth of the matter is that if we are going to shepherd the flock, we need to know whom the flock is. We need to know who is on board with the direction of the church and whom those are that want to be shepherded. Membership is very simply a matter of saying I am on board with what God is doing here and I want to be a part of it. And we are going to make joining the church relatively easy for you. Over the last 8 weeks I have essentially taken you through the membership class of Harmony Bible Church. And so if you would like to join the church all you need to do is pick up an application at Harmony Central after the service or fill one out online at our website. If you will complete that application and get it back to the church office, we will setup an interview with you with one of our Elders and if that goes well, the Elders will approve you as a member. If you have questions about membership you can join me in a membership class on one of the next two Sundays at 9:00 am. Details on that are in the handout.

Of course I recognize that there may be some of you who, for various reasons, either aren't ready to join or don't want to join at this time, and you may be wondering what this means for you. Let me tell you that the leaders of Harmony are committed to shepherding everyone who calls Harmony home, member or not. If you walk through our doors we are committed to teaching you, praying for you, encouraging you, and doing whatever we can to help you become a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. So, please note that you have always been welcome and always will be welcome. At the same time, we do believe that God would have you to be a member of a local church, and would strongly encourage you to consider joining with us in our mission to make disciples in SE Iowa and around the world.