

Key verse: Matthew 28:19-20 (NASB95) – “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. As many of you know, I have been taking courses in an online seminary program. The course I am taking right now is on Discipleship, and I have been learning so many interesting things in that course that I have decided to share some of that information with you today. The title of today’s message is “Discipleship.”

First, I want to ask this question: What is a disciple? Well, in the video lectures I have been listening to, the teacher gave this definition of a disciple: “A disciple is a follower or a devotee of a teaching or a person.”

A disciple is a follower or a devotee of a teaching or a person.

We are followers of Jesus Christ. We are followers of Christianity, the teachings of Jesus and His apostles as recorded in this book, the Bible.

Let’s take another look at this definition of a disciple. The information I’m sharing with you today comes from a video course produced by Logos Bible Software, a course entitled *Discipleship in History and Practice*, taught by Dr. Frederick Cardoza. Let me quote more from Dr. Cardoza’s definition of a disciple:

“A disciple is a follower or a devotee of a teaching or a person. That’s fundamentally what a disciple is, but in Christianity a disciple is a Christ follower. It’s someone who converts from his or her previous manner of living—the repentance of sin and faith in Christ—and that person then begins a lifelong, loving relationship with the living Christ, evidenced by a pursuit of becoming like Christ through obedience to His teachings.”¹

Let’s read how Jesus initially called a few disciples to follow Him. In Matthew 4:17-22 (NASB95) we read this – “From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”¹⁸ Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.¹⁹ And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.²¹ Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them.²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.”

At the start of His ministry in verse 17, we see that Jesus preaches to everyone that they should repent – that is, to turn away from sin. That’s the beginning step in conversion. Repentance literally means to change one’s mind and then that results in a change of direction, a change in the orientation of your life, away from sin and toward a relationship with the true God, and His Son Jesus Christ.

Then we see Jesus calling two pairs of brothers to follow Him. This is the beginning of direct discipleship for these four men that Jesus has called to follow Him. Actually, this day was not the first time these men had met Jesus. If you read John chapter 1, verses 35-42, you’ll see that Peter and Andrew already had met Jesus and had recognized Him as the Messiah. Now, here in Matthew,

¹ Frederick Cardoza, *ED205 Discipleship in History and Practice*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). Segment 1.

in this scene at the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls these four men to follow him on a long-term basis – He specifically says, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” This will be their life task: firstly, to follow their teacher Jesus, and then later to be “fishers of men” – that is, to spread the gospel message and to bring people into the Kingdom of God.

Let’s fast forward to the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Here we read Jesus’ final instructions to His followers. Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB95) – And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

We call this the “Great Commission.” Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them. Teach them. Bible scholars tell us that the main verb in this section is the command to **make disciples**. The primary task of the church is to make disciples: to spread the gospel message to all nations so that in every land there will be followers of Jesus Christ. There are three additional verbs in this Great Commission: we must **go** to every nation, we must **baptize** new Christians in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we must **teach** them to observe everything that Christ has commanded. **Go. Baptize. Teach** everything Christ has commanded. But first and foremost, we are to **Make Disciples**.

That is the main topic of today’s message: **Discipleship**. Let me return to those lectures I told you about a few minutes ago. I gave you a rather simple definition of a disciple: “a follower or a devotee of a teaching or a person.” A follower of Jesus Christ.

In those video lectures I was watching, Dr. Cardoza gives a fuller definition of discipleship which I found really impactful and which is the inspiration for today’s message. Here is his full definition: “Discipleship could be defined as becoming and being a flourishing follower of Jesus who embodies the character of Christ by engaging in a lifelong, personal pursuit of holistic transformation and doing so within a like-minded community of faith that’s corporately committed to being and making other disciples.”²

Wow. This is really jammed-packed with several crucial elements important to the life of a Christian disciple. Let me read that definition one more time:

Discipleship could be defined as becoming and being a flourishing follower of Jesus who embodies the character of Christ by engaging in a lifelong, personal pursuit of holistic transformation and doing so within a like-minded community of faith that’s corporately committed to being and making other disciples.

Becoming a follower of Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus. You don’t just become a convert to the Christian faith. You continue an active life of being a follower of Christ ... a flourishing follower of Christ ... who continues to grow and to learn more about Jesus.

The aim of Christian discipleship is to embody the character of Christ. The word “Christian” literally means “little Christ.” In Acts 11:26 we read that Paul and Barnabas instructed the disciples in Antioch for a full year, and then at the end of verse 26 it says “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Our aim is to be like Christ.

Returning to my definition of discipleship, the way to achieve this is “by engaging in a lifelong, personal pursuit of holistic transformation.” I will talk more about that later in this message.

² Frederick Cardoza, *ED205 Discipleship in History and Practice*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). Segment 3.

Notice that we are supposed to be doing this “within a like-minded community of faith that’s corporately committed to being and making other disciples.” Being an active part of church is so important – each of us individually is to be part of the church. It isn’t healthy to be a “lone ranger” Christian who is not connected to the local church. And this corporate body is to be committed to making more disciples: to be spreading the gospel message and bringing more people into the Kingdom of God as disciples of Jesus.

I told you a moment ago that reading that definition of discipleship was the inspiration for today’s message. I see in every phrase of this definition several biblical principles that I would like to look at in more detail. So now, let’s dig deeper into this definition.

Part 1: Becoming and being a flourishing follower of Jesus.

Jesus says this in John 3:16-17 (NASB95) – “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” It is God’s desire to save the world and that is accomplished through believing in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This is the fundamental path to eternal life: to believe in Jesus.

In Romans 10:9-10 (NASB95) the Apostle Paul writes this – “That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” Not only believing, but you should also confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord – confess your faith in front of people. It is after a new convert confesses faith in Jesus that we baptize him or her.

A few minutes ago, I quoted the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. There is also a version of the Great Commission in Luke, chapter 24. Whereas Matthew focuses on the activities of the apostles in spreading the gospel, Luke focuses on what Jesus said is some of the main content of the gospel message.

Luke 24:46-48 (NASB95) – And He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.”

The basic content of the gospel message which we proclaim to all nations is repentance from sin and the forgiveness that we have in Jesus Christ. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, and it basically means to change one’s mind about something. In this context, it means to change one’s mind about sin and to now longer desire it but rather to turn away from sin and to turn toward God.

Jesus paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. 1st Peter 2:24 (NASB95) says – “And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” He paid the penalty for our sin and we are now dead to sin ... we are able to forsake sin and to live for righteousness, to live God-honoring lives.

I want to ask you today: have you become a disciple of Jesus Christ? Do you recognize your sinfulness and have you repented from your sin and turned to God? Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ? His death on the cross is the sacrifice for our sins and through faith in Him, we receive forgiveness and new life. If you have not done that yet, you can do so today. After the service, you can talk to me or to any of our church council members about how to do that.

That is the path to salvation in Christ, to becoming a disciple of Christ. After that, we begin the process of spiritual growth. We call that the process of sanctification. Sanctification means to be “set apart” to God – turning from the world’s ways and conforming our lives to Christ.

Now that we have become Christian disciples, we live righteous, God-honoring lives. According to the definition of discipleship I gave you, we live as a “flourishing follower of Jesus.”
A flourishing follower of Jesus.

Part 2: Being a flourishing follower of Jesus who embodies the character of Christ by engaging in a lifelong, personal pursuit of holistic transformation.

Colossians 1:10 (NKJV) – “That you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”
Live a life worthy of the Lord ... being fruitful ... increasing in the knowledge of God.

2nd Thessalonians 1:3 (NIV) – “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.”
This is the Christian ideal: to be always growing ... increasing in the knowledge of God and also increasing in our love for one another.

To be a “flourishing follower of Jesus,” as my definition of discipleship says. I wonder sometimes how *flourishing* my life is. I don’t always live up to this ideal. Well, back in my 20s and 30s, I was really hungry to learn all about God’s Word and how to live the Christian life. I’ve mellowed out a lot since my 40s, though I still love learning.

Let me share a passage of Scripture that is special to me. I know it’s special to Pastor Bruce as well, because he quoted it in one of his messages a few months ago.

2nd Peter 1:5-8 (NASB) – “Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge,⁶ and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness,⁷ and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, Christian love.⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In my Bible reading, whenever I come across this passage of Scripture, I pause for a few minutes and ponder how I am doing in each of the areas mentioned here.

We are to apply diligence in living the Christian life. How diligent am I being, I sometimes ask myself.

Building on our faith, we move toward moral excellence. Other Bible translations say: virtue. I think it’s interesting that after putting faith in Christ, what Peter focuses on for the next step is virtue, moral excellence. What is of foremost importance is that we seek to live morally upright lives, honoring God.

And then comes knowledge. We need to learn more about God and read His Word. This is important.

And then self-control. Don’t become complacent. Don’t backslide. Many Christians experience a time of backsliding. That’s easy to do if you don’t maintain self-control. Please remember that.

And building on self-control, we then persevere. There will be many challenges when you try living the Christian life. There will be temptations of various sorts, from inside you as well as from the world around you. We need to live a life of perseverance.

And through all of this, our aim is godliness. Godliness. To be like God in our character. To live God-honoring lives that show the world that we are children of God, faithful followers of His Son, Jesus Christ.

And from godliness we will increasingly practice brotherly kindness. The Greek word here is *philadelphia* = love of the brethren.

And at the end of the list is love, agape love. God's self-sacrificial love. This is the aim of the development of Christian character.

Verse 8 again – “For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

These qualities ought to be seen in us and ought to be increasing. These are a crucial part of the Christian life, and having them will lead to fruitfulness in our life and ministry.

Let's look again at the title of Part 2 of my message: Being a flourishing follower of Jesus who embodies the character of Christ by engaging in a lifelong, personal pursuit of holistic transformation.

These character qualities that I just outlined for you are some of the ones we need to develop in our lives in order to “embody the character of Christ.” We won't do it perfectly while we still live in these imperfect bodies, but this should be what we aim for in life.

Let me share with you another favorite verse.

The Apostle Paul says this in Philippians 2:12-13 (NASB95) – “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

Be careful when you read this – this verse isn't saying that we work for our salvation. No, what this verse means is that now that we are saved, we continue in the Christian life by putting some effort into doing those things that God wants us to be doing. Remember, a moment ago I read for you 2nd Peter 1:5 which told us to “apply all diligence” to building up our Christian life. We serve an awesome God, and so, with a certain amount of “fear and trembling,” we actively seek to live godly lives and do the tasks that He desires us to do. Look at verse 13 – notice that it is God who is at work in us. We need to be open to Him and to get moving, but He is the one empowering us and directing us, moving us to will what He wills and to do what pleases Him. We work and God works, empowering us.

Many years ago, I heard an interesting little proverb from an ancient Christian disciple. I don't know who said this first, but I find it motivating and so I would like to share it with you.

An ancient Christian proverb: “You cannot take anything with you into the next life, except the virtues which you have gained in this life.” This proverb reminds us that we can't take any of material wealth with us to the next life, nor even our social standing or other things that the world values. What we bring into the next life are the virtues which we have cultivated in our lives. This is the most important thing to each of us as individuals: to develop godly, Christlike character.

Again, back to my definition of discipleship: “engaging in a lifelong, personal pursuit of holistic transformation.” This is lifelong, as I pointed out before. And it is a pursuit of holistic transformation.

Transformation. This reminds me of another favorite verse. Paul says in Romans 12:1-2 (NIV) – “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Look especially at verse 2: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Do not conform to the habits of this world, to the self-centeredness, the immorality, the pursuit of worthless and temporary pleasures. Instead, be transformed. Transformed. By the renewing of your mind. It all starts in the mind. Fill your mind with God’s Word – through Bible reading, listening to sermons, reading wholesome Christian books. Let these words transform your thinking, so that you will be thinking godly and uplifting thoughts.

Well, I would like to move on to the last part of today’s message...

Part 3: “Doing all this within a like-minded community of faith that’s corporately committed to being and making other disciples.”

The first thing I want to point out is that we each live the life of a Christian disciple *within a like-minded community of faith*. We do this within community. We are not “lone rangers” living the Christian life away from the church, away from the Christian community. We need each other.

I am reminded of a poem written 400 years ago which I am rather fond of. Actually, it’s not really a poem, but it’s a few lines from an essay that was written in the 17th century by John Donne, who was a pastor in the Church of England. The words I am about read for you come from an essay he wrote entitled “Meditations XVII,” and these are the most famous lines from that essay:

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main[land].
If a clod [of soil] be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, ...
Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in all mankind,
and therefore, do not ask to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

No one can be entirely alone. Everyone is a part of a community. If even one member of the community is missing, the community is less because of it. John Donne said: “any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in all mankind, and therefore, do not ask to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” Any person missing from the community diminishes each person in that community. When the bell tolls, calling people to action, don’t ask for whom that bell tolls – it is calling you to action. It tolls for thee.

During my college days, I memorized eight or ten verses which have been influential to me in how I have lived my Christian life. One of these verses is Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB95) – “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

We should not forsake assembling together. We should come together, and we should be encouraging each other in our individual walks with the Lord. We should be stimulating each other to love one another and to do good deeds. We need each other, and we need to be an active part of the local church.

In some of my previous sermons here, I have shared with you some verses in 1st Corinthians 12 about how each one of us has been given a task to do in the local church, the Body of Christ – each of us has been given a spiritual gift. 1st Corinthians 12:27 (NIV) – “Now you are the body of

Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Verse 7 says – “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit [a spiritual gift] is given for the common good.” Each person in the church has been given a spiritual gift, and each one of us is to exercise our gift for the benefit of everybody in the church.

1 Corinthians 12:11–12 (NIV) – “All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. ¹²Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.”

Verses 14-16 – “Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.”

Verses 21-22 – “The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”

Indispensable. Every one of you is indispensable to the church. Whether it’s big or small, we all have something to contribute to the smooth working of the Body of Christ. We all have a part to play.

The professor in the video which I have been watching likes to quote 1st Corinthians 1:2. He has focused on one phrase in the verse, which he quotes like this: “We are called to be saints together.” Together. It is together that we build one another up and build up the church.

Let’s take a final look at the definition of discipleship which I have been highlighting: “... a community of faith that’s corporately committed to being and making other disciples.”

This community of faith – the local church – should be committed to being disciples and then to making other disciples. Let’s look at the Great Commission one more time in Matthew 28:19-20 (NASB95) – “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Go and make disciples. Baptize them. And teach them everything that Christ commanded. We have received this message. We have been made disciples and this commission has been passed on to us: to make disciples and teach them all that Christ has commanded. I pray that all of you will be faithful followers of Christ and play your part in building up the Body of Christ.