

*CrossWay's Vision: Delighting in Christ Through Discipleship*

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*Psalm 111:10; John 10:1-5; Romans 15:1-7*

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from Romans 15:1-7. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy word. Paul writes, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

American companies spent over \$25 billion dollars in leadership training last year. It's so big, it's known as "the leadership industry" – people and corporations whose whole purpose is teaching people how to be leaders. Books like "Who Moved My Cheese?" and "The One Minute Manager" are perennial best-sellers selling tens of millions of copies around the globe.

It's also huge in Christian circles. The Willow Creek Leadership Summit held yearly in Chicago has featured corporate CEOs, business mavericks, and even a sitting President of the United States. The Leadership Summit is broadcast to over 450 sites across the nation with perhaps a hundred thousand folks paying \$200 for two days of leadership training.

But the problem is, the industry isn't working. Cold hard data shows that employees still don't trust their managers to lead well. The leadership industry has no data to prove that what it says is right, only that people who take their courses feel they understand leadership more. And in the world of Christianity, we must ask whether an influential person, someone who knows how to get people to follow them, is necessarily also a pastoral person. God gives us an entirely different model of leadership from the world. Even those who have positions of authority in the church are under the authority of Jesus. There is no one in the church, in the fellowship of believers, who is not supposed to be a follower.

As we've been studying our vision for CrossWay and its future, we've reached the final phrase. Let's read it together. "Our vision is to lead others toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus through service, invitation, fellowship, and the teaching of God's Word, encouraging them to faithfully follow as His disciples." We've reached the last part – encouraging everyone who comes in contact with CrossWay to follow Jesus faithfully as a disciple. It has just as much to do with us as anyone who enters our ministry. Because all of us are called to be disciples.

But even that word is kind of loaded, isn't it? What is a disciple? Jesus had many, many disciples, but He had a band of twelve disciples that we all have heard about. This group of twelve – minus Judas and including his eventual replacement, Matthias – became known as the apostles. So what does it mean to be a disciple today?

The word means “follower,” “pupil,” or “student.” One great definition I read was this: “Someone who follows another person...and submits himself to the teaching of that leader.” It’s both literal and figurative. The first disciples of Jesus literally followed Him wherever He went. But they also followed His teachings – they tried to understand them and practice them. Psalm 111:10 defined discipleship in practice: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.” A disciple is one who had utter reverence for God and seeks after His ways, increasing their knowledge and love of Him through it.

So when we look at CrossWay’s vision of what we should be, here’s our guiding principle: *we are to be faithful followers of Jesus encouraging others to be faithful followers.* Following is the key. I love the promise that’s on the front of our bulletin today, the illustration of Matthew 4:19. Jesus says, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Notice that His promise isn’t, “I’ll make you leaders of men” or “captains of industry.” His promise is that the disciples will do their current job as fishermen, only they will now catch people with the gospel and bring them into the Kingdom of God. It isn’t a promise of leadership but a promise of transformation into new people who can spread the good news of God’s love effectively.

Jesus gives us the core of discipleship in Matthew 28. It’s known as the Great Commission, and it gives the reason why we spread the news of Jesus everywhere – He commands it. It also tells us what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 28:18-20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

First, Jesus gives a summary of why He sends His disciples out, and the ultimate reason to become a disciple. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” That’s why we become disciples – Jesus offers us salvation, He brings us new life, and all He says and does has authority over us. He is the perfect one to follow.

Next, Jesus says, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.” Wherever you go, however you go, going to the store, going to meet a friend, going to the book club or the photo club or work or school, be in the habit of making disciples. Then there’s the “all nations” part – no one is left out of the invitation to follow Jesus – anyone from anywhere can follow Him. There is no such thing as someone too rich, too poor, too fancy, too homely, too crooked, too good, too foreign, too whatever to not become a disciple.

Now here’s the fun part: Jesus tells us how to make followers in this summary, how to make disciples, though we often don’t connect them. Making disciples of Jesus has two parts: “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” The first part, baptism, is the acknowledgement of their homecoming. Baptism is the outward sign of an inward faith, the mark of one turning away from sin and turning toward God.

The second part is just as important: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Every true Christian is a disciple, a follower of Jesus, and that means obedience. We aren’t called to make converts to a certain truth – that is, people who just believe in their minds that Jesus died to save us from sin. We aren’t called to make churchgoers, either – people who just show up for worship and then go about their lives. We are called to make disciples – people whose lives and actions become obedient to God’s ways.

Obedience doesn’t come naturally, but it grows as we follow Christ. It grows as we get to know God’s love for us better, as we experience more of Him in worship and in Scripture, as we participate in service and fellowship, in inviting and teaching. A disciple, a Jesus-follower, becomes obedient out of a desire to please God. That requires an entire change of heart, but God can do it in us. We have to recognize that we become obedient only after becoming Jesus-followers. We can’t be obedient beforehand. We cannot clean ourselves up and then come to Jesus. Jesus is the One who does the work; then we experience the benefits.

Being a disciple of Jesus is a life-long pursuit, not something we do for a short time. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. From Romans 15 tonight, we heard this: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus.”

We need endurance because life throws so many things at us. Temptations, struggles, disease, financial burdens, heartaches, even just the attractive things of the world that can serve good purposes...all of them attempt to pull us away from discipleship, from following after our Lord. We need encouragement because life can be discouraging. I thank you for all the prayers for my mom for that very reason.

But the promise of Romans 15 is that God provides not only encouragement and endurance but unity as we follow Christ. We do not walk this road alone. God gives us each other. We are marathon runners, but we can all win the race. When one falls, we pick him up; when one struggles, we grab her the water bottle; when one gets a burst of energy, we cheer. The race won’t be over until every last person God will bring into His Kingdom has crossed the finish line. So the best thing we can do is keep running the race and helping our fellow runners.

Endurance, encouragement, unity – all these things are vitally important to the disciple. And here’s why. If the guiding principle of discipleship is that we are followers making followers, *the core truth of discipleship is that disciples don’t set the agenda or the rules, but keep following even in those areas they find difficult.*

If you haven’t noticed already, we’re in the middle of a presidential election cycle. It’s hard to believe we’re in for another ten months of it! But here’s the truth of it: we’re getting ready to elect a new leader of the free world. Trump, Clinton, Cruz, Rubio, Sanders, Carson, whomever finally comes out on top, that’s who we’ve got.

You can choose not to vote for any of them. You can choose to vote for one of them when November rolls around. You can actively campaign for one and throw your support behind your candidate. But the one thing you can't do is change what they stand for. If you vote for Sanders, whether you accept it or not, he's a proud socialist. If you vote for Trump, whether you like it or not, you vote for the first presidential candidate to own a casino and strip club. You can't change those truths.

Following Jesus is not a matter of following when it's convenient or easy. We can't change what He said or commanded to suit ourselves, which means following Jesus requires us to follow Him when it is to our personal disadvantage in this world to do so. Our first priority is no longer ourselves. As Paul wrote in our passage today, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.""

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Denial of self is tough. It is hard to say to God, "You control my job, my family, my finances, what I do in my free time." But followers don't get to tell God what we will and won't do. We fail to follow faithfully when we deny Jesus ultimate say over what we do with our lives and our possessions. We fail to follow faithfully when we refuse to obey a command because we don't like it or don't yet understand why that command exists.

Is that hard? Absolutely! We live in a culture that has told us to be independently-minded, to stand out from the crowd, to lead, not follow. It is difficult to subject ourselves to anyone's authority. But that's precisely what Jesus tells us to do. Even Christian leaders, when they do their job right, lead by imitating Christ and pointing back at Jesus. Christian leaders lead through serving. As I read from author Lisa TerKeurst this week, "A real sign of spiritual maturity is looking to God for purpose and perspective, not comfort or convenience."

To fulfill our calling at CrossWay, we serve those who come into our midst. We are uncompromising on our love for Jesus and our willingness to give all for Him. Because the world is full of people who attend a church service but never let it affect their lives. But when people meet real disciples, their whole worldview can change. Because disciples who are willing to give up everything for the sake of Jesus are unlike other people. People are changed as they see Christ modeled for them, who gave up His rightful place by His Father in order to save us from our sin and rebellion.

Now don't be discouraged if you haven't followed as you should, if your life or heart or actions or finances haven't reflected true following without compromise. The straight and narrow path that Jesus leads us on never disappears. We may walk a long way away from it, but it is always there to return to. It is always good to reflect on how we live and if we have let Jesus have the final word over what we do, how we spend our money and our time.

If the guiding principle of discipleship is that we are followers making followers, and if the core truth of discipleship is that we don't set the agenda or the rules but keep following, then *the great reward of discipleship is true joy as we meet Jesus in the journey of following.*

Faith often starts with wanting to avoid punishment. The prophets all warned the people to follow God rather than to face God's wrath. Even Jesus did. But sometimes, we associate God with punishment and think, "How much do I really want to hang around with God if He would punish me for my sins?"

That's why discipleship is so rewarding. When we say to others from the very beginning that the deep heart of Christianity is not escaping God's wrath but following Jesus and becoming more like Him, we set up a new paradigm. Escaping God's wrath is important, but it is just a blip in comparison to getting to know Him. As Jesus preached about judgment, He let us get to know Himself and taught us about the Father and the Holy Spirit.

True joy is not like the fleeting nature of happiness. True joy stays with you always. True joy comes when you see that God loves you and has rescued you from death (John 3:16). True joy comes when you see that Jesus became nothing so we could become His adopted brothers and sisters (Philippians 2:7 and Romans 8:29). Romans 15 told us earlier, we accept one another as Christ accepted us. True joy comes when we learn from Romans 8:28-29 that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We can find that joy in the midst of severe suffering (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

1 Peter 1:8-9 describes it this way: "Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." And over and over again, the letters from Peter, John, and Paul tells us that there is no greater joy when others become faithful followers because we have led them to the Lord.

When we walk with Jesus, when we determine to be His followers, and we do it with vigor and purpose, that joy is ours to claim. We know joy in the truth that one day, we will see Jesus face to face and walk with Him, literally, in His Kingdom. In fact, the only place where Paul writes about a church losing its joy is when the Galatians stopped following the truth of the gospel, turning aside to a different message of salvation through works. Following faithfully is the path to true joy in God and His love.

John 10 tells us, Jesus is our shepherd, and His sheep – that's us! – follow Him because they recognize His voice. They won't follow another because they know the stranger isn't Jesus! Our goal, our vision, our emphasis at CrossWay is to point all of us here toward Jesus so that we recognize His voice. The more we follow, the more the timbre of His voice will ring in our ears. The closer we follow, the more we will find our own desires and ambitions giving way to His. The more steps down His road we travel, the more joy we will find. At CrossWay, may we be disciples – Jesus-followers – who lead not through worldly wisdom or might but simply as guides to the pastureland of our Savior King.