

Discipleship 101: Multiplying Like Jesus
By Jason Huff
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Genesis 15:1-6; Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 2:42-47

Our final Scripture reading today is Acts 2:42-47. May God bless the reading of His perfect, infallible, and holy Word. “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Once you learn how to multiply, you don't want to add any more. You get five pennies and someone gives you five more, that's ten, that's addition. But multiple five pennies by five pennies and you get twenty-five. That's better. All of this is literally elementary, right? We've known it since we've been children. You always wind up with more by multiplication.

We've heard the saying, “Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime.” It's basic math, addition vs. multiplication. If you give a man one fish, he eats it, subtraction, nothing more to eat. But teach a man to fish and you have multiplication, he can catch far more than he can eat, even when you subtract, you have more. Of course, if you teach a man to fish, he'll spend his paycheck at Cabela's. But the key to success in so many areas of life is multiplication.

Our final week of Discipleship 101 is about multiplying like Jesus. In the passage we heard today from Matthew 28, Jesus told the apostles to go and multiply – to make disciples, teaching them to obey all Jesus had commanded them. Through their work, they fulfill the promise made back thousands of years back to Abraham that his descendants, both physical and spiritual, would be more than the sands on the seashore.

Shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection, as the apostles spread the word, Acts 2 says that God added daily to the number of disciples. Daily people were coming to know Jesus – that's a huge multiplication! From 12 scared apostles and a handful of scattered followers to about 5,000 disciples in a matter of several weeks. That kind of multiplication was unique in the early church, amongst those who had met Jesus for themselves, but it helps us to understand our role as disciples in multiplication.

Before we move forward to understanding how to multiply disciples like Jesus, we need to take a step back and look critically at why this is such an important and timely issue. Because if you grew up in America, you grew up in an American church that for the most part didn't attempt to make disciples and still rarely does. In the last 80 years, the American church didn't have to make disciples to keep going. Now, it not only *should*, but it *must* make disciples just to survive. And more importantly, it's what Jesus wants, intends, and expects of us.

We have to unlearn what the American church taught us about making disciples. From the late 1930s until about 2000, the Christian church was the majority in our culture. Over 76% of Americans were members of a church in 1947. It was rare that someone didn't attend church; it was even rarer that someone wasn't a Christian. Church had social benefits; you sold Mr. Smith widgets on Monday because you were in his church on Sunday.

Expectations in many churches were not high for members. Church growth often came from switching churches, which meant you needed a friendly pastor more than a theologically deep one. For those who weren't believers, they'd learned enough about Christianity through our culture that 40 minutes from Billy Graham was often enough to get them through the doors. Some churches truly did emphasize a deeper walk with Jesus, a disciple's walk like what had been taught throughout the ages in church – but many did not.

Times have changed. Less than half of Americans belong to a church today. Over half of non-Christians think the Christian church has no impact on society or a negative impact. People no longer come to church just because it's there. A growing number of young people are second-generation unchurched, which means they know nothing about Jesus or the Biblical story except what they pick up from the media. The statistics aren't promising.

I believe the decline of the American church is primarily a result of not making disciples and focusing instead on church attendance. Church attendance and church membership aren't measurements of how many people are truly disciples saved by God's grace and living as followers of Jesus. We don't need more church members; we need more true disciples who make other disciples. We need to learn what it means to multiply disciples like Jesus did.

For the rest of our time today, we're going to lay out some principles for the biblical multiplication of Jesus followers. These are the ways that we see Jesus and the apostles after Him making disciples. This isn't all of them; these are just ones that we see enough to make us realize that if we act like Jesus, we'll wind up doing these things.

First one: *Jesus' primary disciple-making happened outside the synagogue.* The local synagogue was the place of worship for Jews and corresponds to what we think of as a church building. Jesus attended worship. He was invited to speak and read at worship. When Paul and others traveled to share the good news of Jesus, they met and taught at the local synagogue until they got themselves kicked out. But little of what Jesus and the apostles said and did took place in the synagogue. Instead, it happened on city streets, on the hills and plains outside villages, in homes, in marketplaces. Jesus ate with those who welcomed Him and taught them. When Paul is under house arrest, he opens his home to anyone who would come and learn.

We tend to think that our role as Christians is to invite people to church, to worship. And again, back in the golden era of the American church, that's all that was asked of most people. But during the early 1950s, more people attended Sunday school than attended worship. Isn't that stunning? Usually we think of only a few people interested in Sunday school and everybody coming to worship. But it was reversed. Because at the beginning of the American church age, people who weren't certain what they believed and children went to Sunday school. Worship was for believers. That changed at some point.

The point being is this: a church invitation is not how Christianity spread. Christianity spread when unbelievers heard and saw the gospel lived out in front of them. It happened a meal at a time, a conversation at a time, a prayer answered at a time. Worship is an expression of our love and thankfulness for Jesus' grace to us, and we come together to praise, learn, and grow. We love worship. But inviting someone to a church worship service is different from disciple-making. One can lead into the other, but they are different things.

How do we make disciples, then? That leads right into idea number 2: *Jesus made disciples by investing significant time in a small number of people genuinely interested in following Him.* Jesus spreads the good news of the Kingdom of God to all that He meets, and He teaches, heals, and touches many. But He actively invests His time in the twelve apostles and, to a lesser extent, the seventy disciples beyond them. He meets them where they are – fishermen and tax collectors alike – and He spends three years with them. He chooses them, but they follow. It is through His deep investment in them that they are ready to go and spread the news of salvation with passion and boldness and courage, multiplying the number of Christians.

Paul, emulating Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit, spends weeks, months, even years in each community God works through him to build, investing in them. When he can't be with his people in person, Paul sends them letters of encouragement, warning, and training. And Paul particularly invests in leaders to come like Timothy and Titus. He too is multiplying.

We know this works because most Christians see it happen, even if they haven't fully committed to discipleship, in our homes. Not every Christian raises Christian children; sometimes the faith doesn't get passed down, sometimes it's rejected. It must be intentional. But the most significant factor as to whether someone becomes a Christian is if they were raised in the faith. A family that prays together, worships together, and learns about God together is the one most likely to have children that grow up to remain in the faith.

When we have absorbed and put into practice the other elements of discipleship we've discussed the last five weeks, we are ready to make disciples too. We start by praying that the Holy Spirit would lead us to people who He has been preparing to hear the gospel and believe it, or that He would lead us to those who are casual Christians but have not actually committed their lives to living as disciples. We also pray that God would clear our schedules in such a way that we can invest in others. It doesn't have to be a huge time commitment, but we need to have enough time so that when God places someone in our path, we can take the time necessary to help them have a fully-formed faith where they too are eager to make disciples.

It isn't about having all the answers or even knowing where to start. There are many good books like the one we've been using with our Bible study called *Discipleship Essentials* by Greg Ogden. And if the person you're discipling gets confused or stuck or asks questions you simply can't answer, that's the reason you have a pastor – to point you in the right direction, to help you find how best to move that new disciple forward in faith.

Many of us have grown up terrified that we're supposed to be on a soapbox preaching somewhere or passing out religious literature. That's not multiplying disciples. Evangelists are important; they might be used to ignite a spark in someone's heart for Jesus at a camp or a mission trip or a retreat. But that spark needs to be ignited into flame by someone willing to disciple that new believer. Unless we're evangelists, our role is not so much to light sparks but to see sparks that could become raging fires of faith and belief and to nurture them. That happens by spending meaningful time with those new believers who need a guide and a mentor.

Don't worry if you haven't done it before or you're a relatively new Christian. All it takes for us to become disciples who multiply is a heart for Christ and a desire to serve Him. It's often new Christians who are most passionate about their faith and are best at spreading that flame of faith. You have a guide and mentor in me and in other faithful believers in the church, so let's do this together in the courage of Christ!

This brings me to a third element of Jesus' disciple-making, and it's probably the hardest one to face in the modern day: *Jesus discouraged discipleship without commitment to living a hard life as His follower.* Jesus says "no" to many would-be disciples. In Matthew 8, a scribe says he'll become a follower, but Jesus tells him, "There's no place for me to lay my head." In other words, "If you follow me, you can't be guaranteed a warm bed and a place to stay."

Same chapter, a guy says, "Let me return home and bury my father." (He means, I'll come once my house is in order.) Jesus says, "You follow me and let the dead bury their own dead." Harsh! In Luke 9, still another says, "Let me say good-bye to my family first." Jesus says, "Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God." Jesus is saying, follow me and stop making excuses!

But He's not through yet. In Luke 14, Jesus tells the crowds, "Whoever does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." He goes on to say, "No one can be my disciple who does not renounce all that he has." He likens it to someone checking his account for enough funds before he builds a tower, or a king deliberating if his army can take on a far larger force. Jesus is telling us, count the cost before you become my disciple. Know it can cost you everything. Church history tells us exactly that – all but one apostle was martyred, and thousands upon thousands of Christians in the first 300 years of the faith died for their beliefs.

We have fundamentally flipped the script from Jesus' era. What will it take for you to become a Christian? Do you like our music, our lights, our coffee, our message? Too difficult a topic? Won't revisit that one! Here, let us make you feel warm and cozy. Jesus is love; He never makes any demands on you; He approves everything you approve of and disapproves everything you disapprove of. Just believe in your heart that He saved you and you're saved.

But that's a lie made to get backsides in seats and dollars in the offering plates. Jesus offers us redemption, salvation, hope and a future, eternal life that blesses us now and in the world to come. But He did not come to make our lives easier or physically better. Many times, believing in Him makes life worse. Right now, Chinese churches being torn down; North Koreans tortured for their belief; beheadings in Mozambique. It's awful. But the early Christians suffered greatly and the church exists today because they remained faithful.

If light shows and great bands and winsome speakers can't get people into church, maybe it's because what we're selling isn't worth buying. While we have a lot of problems in our country, a lot of people struggle to get by, we have a lot of comforts. Lights, heat, AC, phones, games, fast food, entertainment, education, work...it's not enough to truly satisfy the hunger of the soul, but it's enough to ignore it for a lifetime. A religion says God loves you no matter what, that all He asks of you is to pray a set of magic words and give a few dollars, sounds cheap, and it is. It's a fake version of Christianity not worth living for, let alone dying for.

The road of real discipleship is hard, paved with mistakes and hardships and failures, but it also means we encounter the real Jesus who really saves us from our very real sins and a very real hell and changes us from the inside out. Real Christianity, a real experience of the real Jesus, is worth all the struggles we may face. And so it is not only OK but imperative to teach the full truth of God to potential disciples without compromise.

We must present all of Jesus, who was winsome and loving but also expected disciples to obey what He taught, who taught a morality for disciples far more difficult than modern thought, who forgives every misstep and every betrayal but also demands we live for God and for others and not for ourselves. This is not to scare off potential believers, but to make sure they understand this is a lifelong commitment to becoming more like Christ, not a quick fix or a "get out of jail free" card but a long walk following after the Jesus who loved us and came for us. There's no point in multiplying false disciples who don't really know the one true God.

But coming off that is our final thought about multiplying like Jesus, and it's the wonderful truth: *when we preach and teach the Word of God in truth and love, living it out despite our faults, true disciples will be made, and they will multiply.* After feeding the 5,000, Jesus gave the crowd a hard teaching about Himself, using the metaphor of eating His flesh and drinking His blood – a metaphor we come to understand is about communion. They were disgusted, and slowly they all went away. Jesus asked the twelve apostles, "Do you want to go too?" And Peter said, "Lord, to whom would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life." They knew despite the hard teachings and hard life, Jesus was the only road to salvation.

If we are committed to multiplying disciples like Jesus, we do not need to worry that the message is too hard, out of step with modern morality, or too demanding. Those that God is calling to Himself will hear the call and believe, becoming disciples themselves. It has never been about how good we are with words or how deep our understanding of the faith, but living a life led by the Holy Spirit and following where He goes. Paul says that the Thessalonian believers came to faith not just because of words but because he and his companions came with the Holy Spirit, with power, and with deep conviction demonstrated in how they lived. They became believers despite severe suffering, Paul said, through what they experienced.

In our era, words don't mean much. People break their word all the time. We don't trust what the press says, what the government says, what companies say, even what our neighbors say. But we do trust what we can see with our own eyes. We can trust when someone lives in a godly way in front of us, when their words and actions line up. If we do that, people will take notice. Some will want to know why and how we live that way.

Some may want to become followers of Jesus. For them, the difficulties of obeying Christ will be outweighed by the joy of knowing Christ. That's because God works through us to bring His children to Himself. God can do wonders through us simply through our step-by-step, day-by-day obedience and willingness to be disciples who create more disciples.

It's been a little audacious to cover the concept of discipleship in just six weeks. It takes a lifetime, and I don't know of anyone who's ever perfected it. But what I do know is this – with the tools we've been given, with the concepts we've laid out, we can genuinely become disciples of our faithful, loving God, and if we are willing, God will use us to multiply the members of His eternal Kingdom.