

“SUCCESS IN DISCIPLESHIP”

6th in Series: Searching For Success

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(Note: This message greatly inspired by and partly modeled after a message by Dr. Tony Evans titled “The Great Commission” and delivered at a Transforming Leadership Conference at Bethel Theological Seminary on October 30, 1998.)

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever noticed cracks in the wall? Have you ever had the problem where it seemed like no matter how many times you spackle and paint over the cracks, they seem to keep coming back and bringing 'friends' with them? Do you know why this happens? (Jeremy/Tim/Mickey?) It's because your problem is NOT the cracks in the wall but your house's shifting foundation.

Sometimes, the same can be true in our Christian walks and even in our churches.

Have you ever wondered how it is that our community and world is full of so many Christians, churches, ministries, etc. and yet there are still so many problems? Some say it is because “Sinners are sinning.” No, that's what sinners are supposed to do. Dr. Tony Evans proposes another answer: *“Maybe the problem is that the saints are not supposed to be like the sinners who sin and are often more sinful than the sinning sinners who sin. Maybe the problem is that we don't have enough disciples. Maybe we have a lot of Christians and church members and people who give verbal allegiance to the cross, but perhaps the fundamental role of the church has been missed . . . and that is the development of a generation of disciples. That is what the Great Commission is all about.”*

So what does it mean to be successful as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 28:18-20

From the mouths of babes:

- A four-year-old, after watching her mother read from her Bible for at least a few moments each day for several years, started to become concerned. She asked her mother, “Aren't you ever going to get finished reading that book?”
- Another mom asked her four-year-old son, “Benji, would you like to receive Jesus in your heart?” Benji rolled his blue eyes and answered seriously, “No. I don't think I want the responsibility.”

What is the Christian life really supposed to look like?

PRAYER

I.) THE DISCIPLESHIP **DEFICIT**

- While our world is full of Christian churches and our churches are full of self-identified Christian people, there is a great and alarming deficit in our churches and world of true disciples of Jesus Christ – as He defines it.
- Yes, the biggest part of the problem is often that when it comes down to it we love our lives of sin, selfishness and independence more than life in Christ. But, how has it become so normal and accepted for the redeemed to so easily settle for the promise of salvation and easy belief apart from transformed living?
- **The underlying justification, I believe, is a false and unbiblical understanding of what discipleship means.**

A.) Understanding the Concept

- Far too often, we have wrongly come to accept the concept of being a disciple as synonymous with accepting Christ's gift of salvation and identity as Savior.
- We have watered down what it means to be a disciple so much that what we frequently accept is not even recognizable in comparison to what Jesus expects of us.
- As Greg Ogden writes: "... *We focus on the benefits we receive by faith in Jesus rather than on being conformed to the life of Jesus. We want abundance without obedience. [Dallas] Willard calls this 'bar code' Christianity. We are merely concerned with being read by the great scanner in the sky as possessing eternal life. . . We have not called people into an apprentice relationship with Jesus. Jesus is not looked to as our discipler, teacher and Lord. We do not see Him as the compelling figure who is our trainer in this life.*"

(Transforming Discipleship, pp. 46-47)

- **1 Corinthians 3:1-3** *Brothers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were not yet able to receive it. In fact, you are still not able, because you are still fleshly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and living like ordinary people?*
- In order to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission, we need to understand the beginning from the end. That is, we must first evaluate and recognize the gap between where we are, and the stated end Jesus has for us; between our actual character and practice and His call and desire for us. Closing this gap requires an intentional, ongoing process and is accomplished only at a great cost. That cost is giving up what was and what is and replacing it with what Jesus desires us to be.
- **Luke 9:23-24** *Then He said to them all, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it.*
- Tony Evans defines discipleship as "*The progressive process whereby all of life is brought under the authority of Christ.*"

B.) Understanding the Process

- **v.18.** *Exousia*: Specifically, it refers to a legitimate authority.
- Why is this so important for Jesus to establish just before He pronounces the Great Commission? (pause) Because He is making it clear and unmistakable that the foundation to following Him, to being His disciple, is to acknowledge and accept His ABSOLUTE authority. To be a disciple is to unquestioningly accept that He IS the Boss of us, He calls all the shots, He sets all the rules – now and forever more!
- With this as the foundation, Jesus THEN can go on to simply define what it means to be a disciple; that is, what is required for us to close this gap between who we are and who He saved and redeemed us to BE!
- **vv. 19-20.** Note the grammatical construction Jesus chooses to use in this forceful instruction, the infinitive (unending) command is "*to make disciples.*" Attached to this command are three infinitive participles that describe what is necessary to fulfill it.
- In other words, in one phrase, in His last words to His disciples before His ascension to Heaven, Jesus succinctly summarizes what is the earthly purpose of ALL who would follow Him as their Lord and Savior: "*make disciples*" - *first ourselves, then others.* He then goes further in simply defining what this means and how it is accomplished.

1.) **Continuous Action**

- “**Go, therefore**” In the Greek, “Go” here is an imperative, meaning a command, of great emphasis. It is also in a form that indicates an action which is to be both initiated and indefinite. Jesus says, in effect: “if you are truly to be my disciples, then you will actively and enthusiastically proceed to unceasingly build upon this foundation of My absolute authority.”
- **Too often when Jesus says 'Go' we 'stay.'** Many, perhaps most of us, spent at least part of last Sunday evening watching the Super Bowl. Did you notice that before each offensive play, the respective quarterback would call his offensive teammates into a huddle. In that huddle, he would give them instructions on what they needed to do to be successful on that play in order that they might eventually score and ultimately win the game. Once these instructions were given, the quarterback would then end the huddle but saying something like 'let's go!' Now, imagine if Peyton Manning or Drew Brees did this, but one or more of their teammates decided to just stay there in the huddle. Maybe they were being lazy. Maybe they weren't sure if they heard him right. Maybe they were tired and sore, worn out. Maybe they didn't like the play he called. Maybe they just didn't like the fact that he got to call the play instead of them. Maybe they weren't personally ready and were determined to do things in their own good time. Maybe they felt unprepared and over-matched. Maybe one of their buddies stayed first and they just decided to do likewise. Maybe they felt like they were already defeated and decided to just give up. *What would this look like? What would be the result? How successful would that team be? What would the fans think? What would be your opinion of a player who did this? What would be your opinion about the coach or owner of a team whose players acted like this?*
- It would be absolutely absurd and inexcusable! *Why, then, do we justify ourselves and consider it acceptable as followers of Jesus to do the same? Live most or our entire lives in the holy huddle, without going and fulfilling our role in the contest of life? Making our own excuses and insisting on deciding for ourselves if, when, and how to 'get in the game'?*
- We consider ourselves His disciples, yet we make our own rules. We consider ourselves His disciples, yet we violate His call to actively and enthusiastically live under and according to His absolute authority and command to “**make disciples.**”

2.) **Baptizing In Identity**

- Jesus' idea of baptism is so much more than simply getting someone wet! In fact, the word and concept comes from that of dyeing cloth. The cloth is dyed a particular color in order to re-identify it according to the desires and preference of the cloth's owner.
- **Romans 6:3-5** *Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life. For if we have been joined with Him in the likeness of His death, we will certainly also be in the likeness of His resurrection.*
- But are we?
- v. 19 “*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*”
- **Christian baptism in water is a rite appointed to initiate one into a new identity which is a new life of discipleship under the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!**
- That means, the beginning of a complete personal re-orientation from biological identity according to our earthly birth and parentage to an entirely new identity according to our spiritual re-birth and heavenly family; from an allegiance to the self to an absolute allegiance to the Trinity.
- *What does this really mean or look like in life?* It means that the one who was once just an

office worker is now God's representative in the office place; the one who was once just a builder of homes or systems, is now God's representative to use physical building as an opportunity to build disciples of Christ; the one who was once just a technology trainer is now God's representative who uses technology as a bridge to train disciples; the one who was once just a teacher of academics is now God's representative in the educational environment to teach God's Truth; the one who was once just a health care provider is now God's representative amongst the sick, dying and their families and friends; the housewife is now God's representative in the home; the one who was once just a salesperson is now God's representative to reach out to all who are searching and present them with not only a temporal product or service, but with eternal life and value!

- When we are truly His disciples the world gets to see what God looks like in the office, the business world, construction site, schools, training centers, hospitals, stores and homes!
- Too often, it seems like we can't even identify ourselves solely according to Christ. We're no longer simply Christians, we have to be a certain kind of Christian as defined by other terms.
- Folks, we must never modify who we are in Christ by who we are in other respects – be they ethnicity, personality, schooling, geography, pigmentation, etc. We are Christians first and last and it is our identity in Christ that should modify what it means to also have a particular occupation, ethnicity, personality, schooling, geography, pigmentation, etc!
- **Our faith in Christ defines our humanity, NOT the other way around!**

3.) Teaching For **Obedience**

- Note, Jesus doesn't just describe discipleship as teaching 'something.'
- Nor, even, does being a disciple stop just with learning and teaching Biblical revelation and knowledge. That is all a part of the process, but it is not the goal or end.
- **v. 20a.** *“teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.”*
- **To observe**, here, does not mean to see and notice with your eyes. It means to apply and do what has been learned, to follow through, to live it out!
- The point of teaching in discipleship, according to Jesus, is **not just** to accumulate knowledge, to win Scripture memory or trivia contests, to appear wise and holy, to win debates, or even to know what is right and wrong. **The point of teaching is to transfer right living in the image of Jesus Christ!**
- **Colossians 1:28** *We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature [complete, perfect] in Christ.*
- **Are you living and striving for this today? Are you helping others to live and strive for this today? If not, then according to Jesus, you are not His disciple. You have accepted and even received His salvation, but you are NOT His disciple! If you are not benefiting in your life from His wisdom and power, you are NOT His disciple. If you are settling in your life, character and identity for what is rather than what can yet be in Christ, you are NOT His disciple. If your life is not continually being transformed into a closer approximation of Him, you are NOT His disciple. If you are not actively initiating your own involvement in encouraging and training others to experience these things, you are NOT His disciple.**

II.) THE DISCIPLESHIP '**DANCE**'

- Discipleship does not happen through programs, but through relationships! Programs, if designed and implemented well, are structures and tools to help people connect and grow *in relationship*.
- Primary in all of this, however, is the confidence, assurance and power we have to fulfill this

Commission through an unending relationship with Jesus Christ!

- **v. 20b.**
- Literally, Jesus emphasizes here “***I, even I.***” Jesus' point is to assure His committed followers that as we go about making disciples unto Him, He will be with us each and every step of the way. He Himself will take a special, personal interest in our disciple-making lives. As this is our goal and life pursuit, He Himself will invest Himself alongside and into this pursuit. He Himself will take our lives as well as those to whom we minister to another level. **Thus, ALL of us have the opportunity for success in discipleship!**

CONCLUSION: MAKING IT REAL!

- *Will our disciple making, either in respect to ourselves or others, ever be perfectly completed in this life, on this earth? **No, that's why we have eternity to look forward to!***
- *Will we accomplish this, either in respect to ourselves or others, without any mistakes or failures? **Of course not, that is why we are all called to continue to our learning, growing and perseverance!***

It is not an issue of how much of Jesus each of us have. It IS an issue of how much of us Jesus has!

The true mark of a Christian is that of going beyond belief to living and thriving as fully devoted disciples committed to lifelong learning, living (application), and growth under the Kingdom rule of Jesus Christ! Thus, we are all called to live as representatives and ambassadors of Jesus Christ – in every area of our lives.

Let's Go!