

Disciple-making and the Scriptures

When Jesus told His disciples to go and make disciples, He implied that every disciple is to also be a disciple-maker. After all, a disciple of Jesus obeys Jesus and Jesus told His disciples to make disciples. However, most Christians today don't make disciples because we've fallen into the trap of thinking that helping other people to follow Jesus is only for specially trained Christians. I have read most of the books on disciple-making and most end up designing a complicated process of instruction and training that a PhD in theology or biblical counseling would have a hard time following. We've made disciple-making so complex that most people don't even want to try. That's why it was such a relief for me to learn that disciple-making is really just reading the Bible with someone; and that's what I want to talk with you about today. We're spending our Sundays this fall in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John; which is part of Jesus' final conversation with His disciples before the cross as He prepares them for the big change that's about to occur in their relationship with Him as He returns to heaven. Up to this point He has been with them. From now on, He will be in them. Up to this point, He has only been accessible to a few; now He will be equally accessible to every believer because He will live in every believer. Up to this point, God has performed His work in the world through one perfect Man; from this point on He will perform His work in the world through many imperfect people in whom the perfect Man lives. John 15 is about reproduction; how Jesus reproduces Himself in us and then through us. That's why He compares our relationship with Him to a vine and its branches. The vine and the branches share the same life and Jesus says that just as the branches cannot bear fruit unless they abide or stay connected to the vine, so neither can we unless we abide in Him. So we spent some time talking about how we abide in Christ; because the more connected to Him we are, the more fruit that we bear. We've talked about abiding; now we're going to talk how abiding in Christ leads to bearing fruit. Fruit is the natural result of Christ working in us and through us; and we've seen that fruit in the Gospel of John always refers to people who follow Jesus; so we're talking about how abiding in Christ leads to disciple-making. Last Sunday Jeff talked about how abiding in His love produces disciples and today I'd like to talk about how the role the Word of God plays in the making of disciples. Jesus mentions the Scriptures three times in John 15 and how they relate to both abiding in Him and to bearing fruit so I want to look at the role of the Bible in disciple-making; and specifically at three reasons the Scriptures are essential in disciple-making;

The Scriptures Connect Us (7)

The Scriptures Correct Us (2-3)

The Scriptures Direct Us (9-12)

We grow through reading and applying the Bible and disciple-making is really just reading and applying the Bible with another person.

The first reason the Word of God is essential in making disciples of Jesus is because the Scriptures connect us to Jesus and to one another. I cannot follow Christ apart from being in the Bible regularly and I cannot help anyone else to follow Jesus without getting them into the Bible regularly. Look at John 15:7. *"If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you."* I cannot separate abiding in Christ from His words abiding in me because His word is the way He works in my life. That's why everything the New Testament says the Spirit of Jesus does in me it says the Word of God does in me. Jesus says that I am born again by the Spirit in John 3. Peter and James say that I am born again of the word in 1 Peter 1 and James 1. Paul tells me to be filled with the Spirit in Eph. 5 and to be filled with the word in Col. 3. Paul tells me that I am set free from sin by the Spirit in Romans 8 and Jesus says I am set free from sin by the word in John 8. In fact, everything I can find the New Testament says the Spirit of God does in me it also says the Word of God does in me. That's why Paul says the Word is the sword of the Spirit and Jesus said the words I speak to you are spirit and life. God draws near, speaks, motivates, and strengthens me as I read, study and obey the Bible. If I divorce myself from the Scriptures, I divorce myself from God and this has profound implications not only for our own discipleship but for the way we make disciples. I've been making disciples for over 40 years and if there's a plan for helping people to grow in their relationship with Jesus, I've tried it. Over the past 50 years, the Christian publishing business has exploded and

there are curriculums, workbooks, videos and lectures by famous Christians available now on every conceivable topic: studies for men, for women, for couples, for kids, for the elderly, for professionals, for homemakers, for artists, for dogs and cats; for every Christian in every situation explaining how to apply the Bible to our life. We have more resources for spiritual growth than at any time in the history of the church. What's strange is that with all these tools for understanding and applying the Bible, why American Christians have never been as biblically illiterate. Ken Berding is professor of New Testament at Talbot Seminary and a good friend of Jeff's and he believes that biblical illiteracy has reached a crisis point in America. Dr. Berding says, "According to Gallup, biblical literacy in America is currently at a record low." He adds, "My own experience teaching a class of new college freshman every year for the past 15 years suggests to me that although students 15 years ago knew little about the Bible upon entering my classes, today's students on average know even less about the Bible." "Christians used to be known as 'people of one book.' They memorized it, meditated on it, talked about it and taught it to others. We don't do that anymore, and in a very real sense we're starving ourselves to death." The average American Christian knows far less about the Bible than the average Christian in first century Rome, 16th century Germany, 17th century England or 21st century China. Why? Just as junk food kills us by taking the place of what we really need to be healthy, all the curriculum and tools which the Christian publishing empire keeps churning out keeps us from going straight to the Scriptures and learning from Jesus. The tools aren't the problem. The problem is that we substitute the tools for the Scriptures themselves, preferring to read and discuss the newest Christian book or video or speaker than to interact directly with the original source through which God has promised to speak. The tools are seasoning; the Bible is the main course. That's why in our community groups, we study the Bible. Sometimes we use published discussion guides or listen to speakers to help us to understand the Bible better but we always come back to the Scriptures as the focus; because if we're not abiding in the Word, we aren't abiding in Christ.

Paul writes in 1 Thess. 2:13, "*For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted {it} not {as} the word of men, but {for} what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.*" The only guaranteed curriculum I've discovered in 40 years of disciple-making that actually makes disciples is the Bible itself. Disciple-making is simply reading the Bible together and helping each other to apply it to life today. We've found that most Christians have a hard time sticking with Bible reading when we try to do it on our own. Having a place to share what you've learned and then hear what others have learned provides the necessary structure and discipline to keep us in the Scriptures. This happens in our community groups and to even a greater extent in what we call our DNA groups. DNA stands for discipleship equals nurture and accountability. A DNA group is two people or at the most three people who meet every week or every other week to share what they are learning and how they are applying it from the Scriptures. Mark Hess and I have been meeting every other week for lunch for almost two years now for DNA and we just talk about what's going on in our lives and what God has taught us from the Scriptures since the last time we met and the areas of our life we are repenting of as a result of what He has taught us and the steps we are taking to change. Disciple-making is that simple and it has been so profitable for both of us. I pray that one day every regular attendee here will not only be part of a community group but will also have someone they can read and apply the Bible regularly with because we cannot stay connected to Jesus or to one another apart from the Word of God.

Now the second reason the Scriptures are essential for bearing the fruit of more disciples is that the word corrects us and removes the things which prevent us from bearing fruit. Let's read vs. 1-3 of John 15. "*I am the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me which does not bear fruit He takes away (or as we saw earlier, "lifts up" and tied to a trellis so that young branch won't be trampled underfoot but can grow up strong so that it can bear fruit) and every branch in Me which bears fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit.*" Jesus' disciples knew that at the same time in the spring the vinedressers would lift the young branches up off the ground to attach them to a trellis, they would also cut off the shoots and extraneous growth from the mature branches so that the energy of the plant would be focused on producing fruit. Pruning is Jesus' description of the way God disciplines and trains His children, removing the things from our lives which prevent us from bearing fruit. So how does God prune us? Jesus tells His disciples in vs. 3. "*You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*" The word Jesus uses for "clean" is the same word He uses for "prunes." He tells these men who have been with Him for the past 3 years that they have already been pruned by the word He has spoken to them. The word is the way God prunes us, corrects us and makes us more fruitful. In Psalm 19 David sings about the blessings of the word of God in our lives and at the end he writes, "*Moreover, by them (the Scriptures) Your servant is warned; in*

keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern {his} errors? Acquit me of hidden {faults.} Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous {sins;} Let them not rule over me; Then I will be blameless, And I shall be acquitted of great transgression." We can't know all our errors and hidden faults which is why we stumble into presumptuous sins. All the ways of a man are right in his own sight and we're usually blind to the things we say and do which daily sabotage us. That's why David says we need the Scriptures. The Scriptures reveal who we are and warn us correct us. That's why Paul writes in 2 Tim 3:16-17 *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, (or truth) reproof, (where do I fall short of that truth; where am I not believing it or practicing it?) correction, (what am I going to do to correct this situation) and training in righteousness (how will I put this correction into practice so that it becomes a habit?) so that the man of God may be adequate and equipped for every good work (or as Jesus says, "so that we may bear more fruit.")* The Bible prunes me as I allow it to teach, reprove, correct and train me. We don't just go to the Bible to learn more information. We go to the Bible for surgery. Lately, I have been studying Proverbs and I keep getting the same message: "slow down, think before you speak or act, stop being so rash and thoughtless," which I'd never really noticed about myself before. *"The prudent sees the evil and hides himself but the naive go on and are punished for it."* (Prov. 22:3) *"A fool always loses his temper but a wise man holds it back."* (Proverbs 29:11) *"The naive believes everything but the sensible considers his steps. A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless."* (Proverbs 14:15-16) *"He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him."* (Proverbs 18:13) *"Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, and he who hurries with his feet sins."* (Proverbs 19:2) *"The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty."* (Proverbs 21:5) The fool is gullible, assumes he knows what will happen and that things will work out the way he hopes. The wise man is cautious, assuming, that he doesn't know everything and so he investigates and considers his decisions carefully before moving forward. I saw that foolishness is spontaneous and impulsive, while wisdom is deliberate; that I don't have to plan to act foolishly; I do to act wisely. I make the best decisions when I take the time to make them because wherever I am driven by ego, emotions, fear, circumstances or people, I never make good choices. So right now, Christ is correcting a long habit of carelessness, laziness and make it up as I go which I've had most of my adult life. I've found that if the Scripture doesn't reprove and correct me, I'm not really reading the Bible the way God intends for me to read it. He didn't give me the Bible to satisfy my curiosity but to change my life. The Bible will not benefit me unless it teaches, reproves, corrects and trains me; and that pruning and correcting precedes fruitfulness. *"Every branch in Me which bears fruit, He prunes that it may bear more fruit."* All of us have things in our lives which hamper God's use of us and it is only as we come to the Scriptures that we discover what those things are. That's why Jesus tells the men who have been with Him for three years, *"You are already clean – you have already been pruned; which is not to say that they won't need to be pruned again since pruning is an ongoing process for every fruit-bearing plant- because of the word which I have spoken to you."* Disciple-making is speaking the Bible within the context of a relationship because just as the word prunes us, it prunes others. I don't know how many hours, days, weeks and years I've wasted meeting with men and talking about our lives and what we were going through and calling what we were doing "disciple-making" without ever opening a Bible. It shouldn't come as a surprise that very little actual life change took place as a result of that time because it is the Word of God which prunes us; revealing our errors and our motives; showing us what we didn't know was there, and not only corrects us but trains us and motivates us to change. When Mark and I get together to share what we've been learning from the Word, we always talk about the sins we are currently repenting of and the corrections Jesus is making in us; because as long as we live in this body, there will always be corrections to be made. Helping each other to take the Scriptures seriously and to make those corrections is a vital part of disciple-making.

The first reason the Scriptures are essential for fruit-bearing and disciple-making is because the Scriptures connect us with Jesus and with one another. I cannot follow Christ apart from being regularly in the Bible myself and I cannot help anyone else to follow Jesus without getting them regularly in the Bible. And the second reason that the Scriptures are essential in disciple-making is that the Scriptures correct us; pruning away the things which prevent us from bearing fruit; things we're often blind to otherwise. And the third reason the Scriptures are vital for making disciples is that the Word directs us; showing us what to do and how we're to handle life like Jesus would. Discipleship is following and obeying Jesus but we can't obey Him unless we know what He wants us to do; which we'll only find in the Scriptures. Jesus doesn't normally direct us through visions and dreams or through signs or through what feel right to us at the moment. He directs us through His word. That's why Jesus told His disciples to make disciples by teaching them to observe all that He commanded. Let's look again at John 15:10-12.

"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and {that} your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you." Jesus says that He loves us as much as the Father loves Him; which means there's nothing we can do to make Jesus love us more than He already does. We just need to believe that He loves us which is what Jesus means by "abide in My love." Believe that I love you as much as I say that I love you and act accordingly just as I believe My Father loves me and act accordingly. The more I believe that Jesus loves me, the more I will love Him and the more I love Him, the more I will obey Him – and the more of His joy I will experience. Then Jesus focuses on one particular commandment; to love one another like He loves us – which Jeff spoke on last week. For the Christian, joy is the result of obedience because Jesus lives in us and when we do what He would do, we experience His pleasure and joy and our joy is made full. If I make Him happy, I will be happy, and I can only make Him happy by learning and obeying His commandments. That's why we read and study and memorize the Bible; not to satisfy our curiosity or to perform some religious duty but to learn how to live. That's why James writes James 1:21-25, *"Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and {all} that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for {once} he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the {law} of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."* Notice that abiding in the Scriptures means doing what the Scriptures tell us to do so that we will be blessed as we do it. That's why Jesus gives us commandments. He wants us to be blessed and the message of the Bible from beginning to end is that blessing is the result of obedience; of doing things God's way. That's why there are commandments in the Bible; not to restrict us but to bless us. Isn't that why you parents tell your children what to do and what not to do? You're not on some power trip, trying to prove you're their boss. You love your kids and you want to protect them and you want them to be happy and successful. That's why you're always on them. "Don't run in the street. Eat your vegetables. Finish your homework before you go out to play. Don't buy that car. Don't date that guy." Wouldn't it be easier to let them do whatever they want? Sure but you love them. That's why you tell them what to do and that's why Jesus gives us commands – so that we will be blessed in all our doing. The Bible gives us direction. It shows us what to do and how to do it so that what we do will be blessed. Living as a disciple means learning to obey Jesus' commands and helping someone else to be a disciple means helping them to learn to obey Jesus' commands. I've found three questions help me to apply the lessons Christ is teaching me from the Scriptures. **First, what promise or warning do I find to believe and to obey?** This week I was studying the first chapter of 2 Timothy and I focused on vs. 7. *"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of power and love and discipline."* (2 Tim. 1:7) **How do I fall short in unbelief?** I can't apply something until I see where I am failing to apply it so I write out all the areas of my life where I am failing to believe and apply this particular promise or warning. I was reminded again this week how often I am still a timid man and my knee-jerk reaction to conflict is to do whatever will pacify contention rather than what is right. Since Proverbs says that "The righteous are bold as a lion but the wicked flee when no one is pursuing," this is not acceptable behavior for one in whom Christ dwells. Trusting Jesus by doing right must be more important to me than quelling conflict or preserving my own peace and safety; whatever the circumstances. **What does faith and repentance look like?** Like Timothy I must remember that God has already given me all the courage I need. I just need to appropriate what He has given me by faith. Just as I can say no to lust by faith and receive the power to carry out my decision, I need to say no to fear and timidity by faith and receive the power to carry out my decision. I need to focus on love rather than fear and receive the love I need to carry out my decision. And I need to remember the important role of discipline and self-control and receive the discipline I need to carry out my decision. So what will I do? If I don't think through exactly how I'm going to apply the Scripture, I won't apply it. So I determined that whenever tempted to retreat, avoid, or pacify contention, (1) pray and ask God for the wisdom and boldness to do what is right in His sight. (2) Keep your head: focus on controlling your response and not reacting. (3) Love with Christ's love; this is your primary responsibility here; to do what is most loving for everyone concerned. Remember that perfect love casts out fear. (4) Act confidently and boldly; be the steady, positive force Christ has called me to be. One thing I like about this particular plan for application is that it keeps faith in Christ as my focus. The difference between walking by faith in Jesus and mere religious moralizing is that moralizing is keeping rules for rules sake. But Christians don't live by rules but by faith in Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. The message of the Bible is here's what I supposed to do. Here's

how I fail to do it. Here's how Jesus did it. Here's how Jesus will do it through me as I trust Him. My motive for obedience isn't fear of condemnation but gratitude and love and I obey in faith that He who lives in me will enable me to live as He lived.

If discipleship is following Jesus by following His commandments then disciple-making is teaching others to follow His commandments. Focusing on the application of the Scriptures to real life transforms a small group. For years I was part of small groups which focused on Bible learning rather than on Bible application. We'd discuss what a passage from the Scriptures meant and the Christians who knew the most did most of the talking. People would bring in things they had read about the historical background or the meaning of the original language – which other members didn't have access to; and the result was an intellectual discussion where the most intellectual members got to shine and everybody else just listened. And this went on night after night with little actual life change. People who liked to discuss the Bible or who liked the other members hung in there; those who didn't have as intellectual a bent or who didn't feel that close to the group usually left. But I've found that when applying the Bible replaces simply discussing the Bible, the dynamics of a group change radically. I attend a men's group on Monday evenings and we are studying the book of Genesis, one chapter per week. Each week the guys read through the chapter and focus on a particular verse or verses which speak to them and write out why and how they plan to apply the lessons they learn. When we meet, each guy shares what he learned and how he plans to apply it to his life and it is so rich because we not only learn a lot more about Genesis than we would by ourselves but we learn a lot more about each other and as we see how each guy applies the Scriptures to his own life, the rest of us are challenged to obey in the same way. We've found that when we make application the goal of our time together, it levels the playing field because no matter how long or how briefly we've known Christ, we all have areas He's working in.

I've coached swimming, soccer, Little League and rugby and one thing I've learned is that great athletes make great coaches. If a kid doesn't want to learn, there's nothing you can teach him. I was coaching rugby and the starting quarterback of the football team came out for the team and disrupted everything. Rugby is the ultimate team sport and one prima donna who tries to score every time he touches the ball rather than passing to an open teammate can ruin the game for everybody else. So the other coach and I took him aside to explain that his job was to keep the ball moving and not to try to do everything himself. He replied, "Michael Jordan doesn't need a coach and neither do I," which meant we had to replace him 5 minutes after the game began. You can't coach an athlete who doesn't want to be coached and you can't disciple a Christian who doesn't want to be disciplined. A disciple is a learner; you must want to learn; because you're convinced that change is desperately needed for your own joy and survival. You must be willing to confront failure and error in yourself. There is constant pruning and correction as Jesus makes us more and more like Himself but that's what salvation is all about; being freed from what we were to become what Christ intends us to be for our great joy and benefit. The Bible teaches that when we were helpless in our sins and deformed by the fallen nature we inherited from Adam, unable and unwilling to love our Creator and guilty of thousands of crimes against Him and against people; the Son of God in fulfillment of God's eternal purpose and centuries of promises in the Old Testament became one of us to live the life we were created to live but failed so that God can credit us with His perfect record of obedience when we trust Him as our Savior; to bear the punishment for our sins we deserve on the cross so that God can freely pardon us; and to rise from the dead, defeating death in our behalf so that we can live forever. And when we believe that, Jesus comes to live in us to make us like Himself. Discipleship is the process of learning to follow Jesus and disciple-making is helping others to learn to follow Him. But we won't grow in Christlikeness until we see our need to grow and we can't help others to grow until they want to grow; and that's why we need the Scriptures. I am as committed to becoming like Christ as I am committed to opening up my Bible each day because the Scriptures are essential for discipleship and for disciple-making.

