



## **DEFINING DISCIPLE**

### **Matthew 4:18-22**

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to find Matthew 4. We'll be looking at some passages in Matthew 4 and 28 to consider these questions over the course of two messages: “What is a disciple?” and “What does it mean to make disciples?” We're in a series on key terms and definitions that pertain to understanding mission. On the one hand, this is significant for those who are missionaries around the world who are proclaiming the gospel in places where it's never been heard. But this isn't just for missionaries—it's for every one of us as followers of Christ.

As we'll see, mission is not just for a select few people in the church. Mission is the reason all of us are on this planet. We need to think about key terms based on how God has defined them in His Word, terms like gospel. What does the Bible talk about as the gospel? What are the core truths at its center? Next we looked at evangelism and conversion, asking what it means to proclaim this gospel and why we do that. Our aim is to persuade people to repent and believe, to turn and trust in Christ, and to be converted from being outside of Christ to being in Christ and with Christ.

Once people are converted, the next question is how they are to become disciples. We need to understand what a disciple is and how you make disciples, since this is what Jesus has commanded all of us to do. He wasn't talking just to missionaries around the world, but to every one of us. We are to make disciples of all the nations. So in order to do that, we need to know what disciple is and then we need to think about what the Bible teaches about how a disciple is made.

Matthew 4:18-22 gives us Jesus' initial interaction with some of the men who would become His first disciples. After that, we'll look at Matthew 28 to see His final interaction with them in this Gospel, before He ascended into heaven. I think these two passages will give us a pretty clear picture of what it means to be a disciple and what it means to make disciples. We'll only look at the Matthew 4 portion in this message and we'll dive into Matthew 28 next time. Let's read Matthew 4:18-22:

*<sup>18</sup> While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> And 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. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

This is our initial introduction into what it means to be a disciple. Jesus says to Peter, Andrew, James and John, *“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”* So *“immediately they left their nets and followed him.”* When you get to end of Matthew, Jesus again gathers with those four disciples and seven others. Matthew 28:16-20 says this:

*<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

With these bookends in the book of Matthew, let’s think together first about what it means to be a disciple. I want to unpack this here, but then we’ll think about the same question from the perspective of the whole of Scripture—both the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is a document at <http://www.radical.net> that expands on this, with lots of footnotes and Scripture references if you’d like to dive in deeper. But if I were to ask you how Scripture defines being a disciple, what would you say?

Here’s my best attempt. Disciples are fundamentally followers of Jesus. They’re men and women who have turned from their sin and trusted in Jesus as their Savior. We see conversion described simply in Mark 1:15, *“Repent and believe in the gospel.”* Also in Romans 10:9, *“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* Disciples are people who have turned from their sin and themselves, have trusted in Jesus as their Savior, have died to themselves and surrendered their lives to Him as Lord.

We can think about other passages in Gospels. Jesus says in Luke 9:23, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* Disciples have died to themselves and surrendered their lives to Jesus as Lord. Or one verse that sums up the essence of discipleship better than most might be Galatians 2:20, where Paul says, *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

Think about that imagery: I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. This is the essence of what it means to be a disciple. When Christ lives in a person, it transforms everything about them from the inside out. And that leads me to what I think are six primary marks of a disciple.

### **A disciple has a transformed heart.**

The first thing that marks a true disciple is a transformed heart, which happens at that point in time when the person first puts their faith in Jesus. The other five marks of a disciple gradually increase as

the disciple grows through faith in Jesus as a member of His body, the church. You might picture this like a series of six concentric circles. This will be helpful not only to understand who a disciple is, but also when we think about how we make disciples as people grow in Christ.

Essentially the life of Christ takes root at the core of who we are, then begins to transform everything about us. As we become followers of Jesus as described in Matthew 4:18, that foundation begins to transform the way we think and feel and act and relate to others, and eventually it affects our very purpose in the world. But it all starts with the core reality of Christ in us, at that point in time when a person initially decides to follow Jesus. It is in that moment that they receive a transformed heart and are spiritually regenerated in the core of their being. Their sins have been forgiven and are now indwelt by God's Spirit. Let that soak in.

When I become a follower of Christ, all my sin before a holy God has been totally forgiven, and He remembers it no more. He doesn't count any of our sins against us. And not only that, He has put His very presence inside us. By supernatural grace through faith in Christ, the Spirit of God now lives in us. God the Father looks at us and sees us dressed in the righteousness of His Son. Even more, we are adopted by Him as His children. Not only has God as Judge declared us righteous before Him, He also is a Father Who welcomed us into His family as sons and daughters.

Two of my kids are adopted. We tried for many years to have children without success, so the Lord led us down a path to adoption. Prior to that, I might have thought that would be second best, since we couldn't have children biologically. But we learned quickly that adoption is just as "best." We had the joy of adopting our first son, Caleb, from Khasakstan. We got back to the States and two weeks later we found out that Heather was pregnant. That was a shock, but also a joy, and nine months later we had Joshua.

Even though we knew then we could have children biologically, we also wanted to adopt again. Eventually that led, about three years later, to our adoption of our daughter Mara Ruth from China. We got back from adopting her and three months later Heather was pregnant again. Her doctor told her, "Oh, if you adopt four, that will give you eight kids." We have walked through the adoption process, and we've seen both the joy and the confusion it brings.

When we first brought Caleb home, sometimes people who knew he had been adopted would say to us, "Oh, that's nice. But do you have children of your own?" That's phrase number one of things not to say to an adoptive parent. Caleb was our own. Children don't have to be biological to be ours. The people mean well, but it sounds like they're implying he's not really ours. Another thing they might say was, "Have you ever met his real mom?" I wanted to say, "Well, yeah. Let me introduce her to you. Her name is Heather and she's standing right here. She's his real mom."

Before we went to Kazakhstan, I remember exactly what one person said to me when I told them we were going to adopt a child. They said, “A real one?” No, we’re going to get a plastic child to display on our mantel and look at it every day. Of course we’re going to adopt a real child. Anyway, people would say a lot of confusing things about adoption. They would ask, “Are you ever going to teach him about his family and heritage?” Well, yeah. We’re going to teach him all about his family, his cultural heritage. It may surprise people that our kids know a ton about their heritage.

They know about their Grand-dad, my dad, that they never actually had the opportunity to meet. But they’ve seen pictures and heard stories. One of their favorite videos is the Grandpa video. They know about their other Grand-dad, their two Grandma’s, cousins, aunts, uncles, great aunts, great uncles. They know more about their family heritage than they know what to do with. And even cultural heritage. They’ve read books like Dr. Seuss and they run around the house saying, “Run, run, fast as you can. You can’t catch me—I’m the .....” I guess you know how that line ends, because you have the same cultural heritage.

They know all about their culture’s foods, like fried chicken, mac and cheese, watermelon and birthday cake. They know all about their musical heritage. Caleb may not be able to identify the Kazak national anthem, for example, but he grew up in Alabama, and he knows Sweet Home Alabama really well. They know a lot about their family and their culture because they’re in our family—and they’re a part of this culture. Now, it’s not that we minimize the culture they came from—or even family they have. Yes, we talk about that. But at the same time, they’re fully part of our family. They’re fully Platts. They belong to us totally as our son and daughter. They’re not aliens or strangers in our home. They have family with heritage.

Which brings us back to this picture we see in Scripture of adoption. Do you realize that if you’re a disciple of Jesus, you’re a son or daughter of God? He is your Father. He loves you as His child. What an awesome thought. J.I. Packer wrote a great book called Knowing God, in which he has an excellent chapter on adoption. He said, “The richest answer I know to the question ‘What is a Christian?’ is that a Christian is one who has God as Father. If you want to know how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers—his whole outlook on life—it means he doesn’t understand Christianity very well at all.”

In review, disciples have been acquitted by God the Judge, adopted by God the Father and the gracious regeneration of their hearts has triggered a glorious transformation in every disciple of Jesus. We have been brought from death to life. We’re new creations who now live as servants of the King, heirs of His Kingdom. We’re empowered by the Holy Spirit to grow in holiness as God gradually transforms us into the image of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. All of this takes place, while we hold on to

the sure hope of full and final future glorification with Christ. So the first mark of a disciple is a transformed heart.

### **A disciple has a transformed mind.**

Now think about how a transformed heart affects everything else. The second mark of a disciple of Christ is a transformed mind. This person thinks differently. He or she is biblically grounded and believes what Jesus says. In the language of John 15, the words of Christ abide in us, transforming everything about us as His disciples. We view the world around us through the lens of God's truth. As we hear and read and study and memorize and meditate on Scripture, God molds our minds to become like His. This results in a continual renewal of knowledge that is in accord with the wisdom of our Creator.

We read about this transformation in Romans 12:2, where Paul writes, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”* The more we're in the Word, the more we think as Christ thinks and the more we become conformed to His image. As it says in 2 Corinthians 10:5, we begin to *“take every thought captive to obey Christ.”* The more we receive God's Word, the more we will think “Christianly.” We think differently from the rest of the world. Unlike the transformed heart, our minds are not transformed instantly, but rather gradually as we work to know His mind. It happens at a point in time, then triggers a process whereby that transformation begins to take over every facet of our lives, starting with our minds.

### **A disciple has transformed affections.**

Thirdly, as disciples of Jesus, we are transformed in our affections. As we grow in Christ, it also transforms the way we feel. We become deeply satisfied by Him, and we increasingly desire what He desires. Many times we can have a hard time connecting our faith and our emotions. On one hand, we can be tempted to connect them in a way that's unhealthy. In other words, our faith becomes dependent on our emotions, so as our feelings go up and down, our faith does as well. On the other hand, we can disconnect our faith from our emotions, making faith strictly rational, leaving it with a lack of feeling. But neither of these are God's design. Our faith should not be on a roller coaster with our feelings going up and down, nor should our faith be entirely separated from our emotions.

Rather, the picture we find in Scripture is that when we trust in Christ, our emotions are transformed by God. We begin to desire and delight in Him. Following Christ is far more than duty—it's also about delight and joy. That's the point. Our pursuit of peace and joy and life are what has led us to Jesus. He is the source of these things. He does more than simply save us from our sins—He also satisfies our souls. In John 6 Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Come to Me and eat from Me, and you will never

be hungry again. Come to Me and drink from Me, and you'll never be thirsty again." The beauty of discipleship is that He doesn't just save us; He satisfies us.

Disciples grow to participate in spiritual disciplines, not out of a sense of duty, but out of delight. We worship, not because we have to, but because we want to exalt God. We pray because we crave communion with God. We fast because we hunger for God even more than we hunger for food. We confess sins because we're grateful for the opportunity to be freed from them. We do missions because we love God's glory more than we love our own lives.

So I would ask you to examine your heart and life as a follower of Jesus. Do you participate in spiritual disciplines—worship, prayer, Bible study, fasting, witnessing—out of a sense of duty or out of a sense of delight? If your answer is duty, that doesn't mean you're not a disciple. But it does mean that God desires you to grow into an experience of delight in Him, so that you can say with the psalmist in Psalm 63:1-5:

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live...My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food.*

God desires for us to be satisfied in Him. So let's not live for anything less than that. Let's live for the joy, peace, life, satisfaction and delight that is found in Christ. Disciples are designed by God to have transformed affections—to love Him more than we love the things of this world. Love for Him will push out love for things of this world and impacts the way we fight sin in our lives. Often when we sin—if not every time we sin—it's because we believe doing things our way will be better or more fulfilling than doing things God's way. But we will find that these things never really bring joy or satisfaction. How do we resist sin? We resist it with superior satisfaction and delight in God. When we live according to His Word, we will realize that sin's temptations are false and we'll have victory over them. So the more satisfied we are in God, the more victory we'll have over sin.

### **A disciple has a transformed will.**

The next concentric circle and the fourth mark of a disciple—after our mind and our affections—is a transformed will. Disciples of Christ are humbly obedient, doing what Jesus commands. Jesus told His disciples in John 15, "*Abide in Me...Abide in My love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.*" This is a picture of a person who desires to obey Christ from the overflow of abiding in Him and enjoying His love. So putting this together, as we're filled with His Word in our minds and our desires are satisfied in Him, this leads us to obey Him. We will see Scriptural imperatives as invitations from Christ to experience the joy of life as He's designed us to live it. As we walk according to His Word,

He will conform our ways to His will. *“Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked”* (1 John 2:6). As a disciple with a transformed will, we do what Jesus says.

### **A disciple has transformed relationships.**

Fifth, this leads disciples to have transformed relationships. They are sacrificially loving. They serve and love as Jesus serves and loves. Christ in us begins to affect the way we relate to others around us. We’ve been reconciled to God through Christ, so now we continually work toward reconciliation with others in Christ. We forgive one another freely. We serve one another selflessly. We lay down our lives, loving one another in our local churches.

Then Christ’s compassion in us begins to expand beyond the local church, as we care for the poor and the lost in the global church. A mark of true disciples, as we see in 1 John 3 and throughout Scripture, is that they love one another and lay down their lives for other people. Loving their neighbor as themselves is the second greatest commandment. The first is this, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”* (Matthew 22:37). So our minds, our wills, our hearts and our affections are focused on loving Him, and from that flows a love for others.

### **A disciple has a transformed purpose.**

Putting all these things together, the sixth mark of a disciple is a transformed purpose. True disciples are missionally engaged. They make disciples who make disciples of all nations. This is where we will put Matthew 4 and 28 together. Jesus says, “Follow Me,” and fundamentally that’s what it means to be a disciple. When you follow Him, He says, “I will make you fishers of men.” So from the very beginning, to be a follower of Christ is to be on mission with Him. Then at the end of His ministry, what does He say again? “Go and make disciples of all nations.” This is true for every follower of Christ.

Compelled by His grace, we are captivated by God’s great commission. Jesus has not only transformed the way we live—He’s revolutionized our entire reason for living. We live and die to share the gospel of Christ, to see the life of Christ reproduced in others. We teach His Word to others. We serve the world by praying for, giving to and going to people around the world for the sake of His name. This way of living isn’t just for a special group of disciples—we are all called to make disciples of the nations.

### **Christ transforms us from the inside out.**

Scripture is clear that Christ in us transforms us from the inside out. If we’re going to grow as His disciples, we must constantly come back to what it means to be in Him. We need to consider that we’ve been forgiven of our sins as we repent and believe in Christ. This is why the gospel is so key. We must preach the gospel to ourselves, constantly reminding ourselves that we are in Christ, not because of our

own merit, but because of His mercy. He has indwelled us with His Spirit; we are adopted children of the Father. We live out of the overflow of realizing our identity in Christ.

As our hearts have been transformed, we must pray that God will transform our minds so we will think more like Him. We must read, study, memorize and meditate on His Word, so it will abide in us and transform the way we think. Every thought, every word, every decision needs to be guided by His Word. As this happens, our affections are also transformed. We won't follow Christ simply out of duty, but rather out of delight. We will desire and love and enjoy Him as we walk with Him—and all the emotions that go with that.

Following this, our will is transformed. Our affections are then driven by Christ, which affects the decisions we make. Our decisions and choices become conformed to His will, as we turn from our sin and obey Him. Why? Because we know from His Word what He has called us to do—and we desire to do what He wants us to do. This is so important. When we think about our battles with sin—and sometimes as a pastor I've said this to people—we think we need to just stop doing this or start doing that. Yes, our wills and decisions play a part, but we don't always realize that our decisions are based on our minds and our affections.

Think about the first sin in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve ate a piece of fruit in disobedience to God. It was a decision they made. But the battle came before their decision. We read how the serpent came to Eve and asked her, "Did God really say..?" This caused Eve and Adam to question God's word. That battle was in their mind: "Is God's word really true? Is God really good? Does He desire what's best for us?" That led to desire, so as they saw how the fruit looked appealing to the eye, they wanted to taste it, which then led to their decision to eat it. Their desires were turned from all the wonderful things God had given them to enjoy and they began to think only about how good that fruit looked. So they disobeyed God and ate it.

How do you and I fight sin? Yes, we need to tell ourselves, "Don't do this." So think about how we keep going back to our sins. What needs to happen in our minds? Psalm 119 asks, "How can we keep our way pure?" And it answers, "By living by God's Word." Verse 11 says, "*I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.*" I must fill my mind with His Word and meditate on it. Then we must ask God to replace our desires with desires for Him, for His glory, for goodness and holiness and things that matter.

Together these will take us into the battle in our will, giving us the power to change the way we live and the decisions we make, which then will lead to transformed relationships. And then—the outside circle in our diagram—we will have a transformed purpose in our lives, as disciples who are missionally engaged to make disciples of all nations. This is one of the greatest misunderstandings in the church's concepts of missions.



Let me close with a story. When I was in college and seminary, I saw God's passion for His glory among the nations all over Scripture. As I also started learning about how many people in the world had never heard the gospel, I thought, "Well, I need to be a missionary. This is a no-brainer. I've got to go overseas." I started talking to my wife about that and she saw the same thing. While we were still in seminary, the president of the International Mission Board—an organization I now have the privilege of leading—was a man named Jerry Rankin. He was coming to our campus to preach and I had been asked to take him to breakfast.

The night before, I said to my wife, "I'm taking the president of the IMB to breakfast. I'm going to tell him we're ready to go overseas. Is that okay with you?" She said, "Yeah, that's great! Go for it." So as soon as he and I sat down for our breakfast, I started pouring out my heart. "I see this in the Word. I see the need for the gospel in the world. My wife and I are ready to be missionaries." Dr. Rankin looked back at me and for about 30 seconds he encouraged me in response to what I had just said. But then he spent the rest of breakfast—almost an hour—talking to me about the need for pastors who lead churches in America, shepherding those churches into understanding how to spread the gospel to those who have never heard it. I was so confused.

That night Heather asked me, "How did it go?" I said, "I think the president of the IMB just talked me out of becoming a missionary. I couldn't figure out why." She asked, "What did you say?" I responded, "I don't know!"

But here's what I'm so thankful for from that conversation I had with Dr. Rankin. He created a category in my mind that I don't think was there before. It should have been there, but for some reason I had totally missed it. There is a type of person who is passionate about the spread of the gospel to the nations but who doesn't go overseas as a missionary. What I realized from this is that those who don't go overseas should also be passionate about the spread of the gospel. It should be the purpose of every single follower of Christ.

It's what it means to be a Christian. You have the Spirit of Christ in you, and the Spirit wants the world for Him—so you should as well. We have a tendency to look at missions as being for missionaries. Every disciple of Jesus has been created and called by God to be a part of making the gospel known to the ends of the earth.

So let me challenge you, as a disciple of Christ, to live in the reality of a transformed heart, because Christ has forgiven you of all your sins and has put His Spirit inside you. Let Him continue by transforming your mind, your affections, your will and your relationships—and then ultimately, let Him transform your understanding of the very reason why you're on this planet. You are here as a disciple of Jesus who makes disciples of the nations, to be a part of a global plan to spread the gospel to the ends of

the earth. It's there at the beginning of Matthew—*“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”* It's there at the end in the Great Commission, *“Make disciples of all nations.”*

This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It means to live and breathe to make disciples of the nations. How do we do that? We'll look at that next week. May God give us grace to realize that disciple-making among the nations is not just for a few people—it's for every single one of us as followers of Jesus.

Let's pray.

God, thank You for the glorious reality of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus—to be forgiven of our sins, to be indwelled by Your Spirit and being part of seeing this transformation happen in our lives. I pray for myself and for those who are listening, that this reality of transformation would grow more every day. Help us to think more like You. Help us to desire You and obey You more. Help us to love as You love. And I pray, God, that You would help us to be faithful in the purpose You've given us. Help us to make disciples who make disciples, that all the nations might know the glorious riches of following Jesus. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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