



DEFINING DISCIPLE-MAKING

Matthew 28:18-20

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open to Matthew 28. This is the fourth message in a series on key terms and definitions regarding mission and our purpose in this world. We began by looking at what the gospel is and how it changes our lives for all of eternity. Then we looked at evangelism and conversion—how do we make this gospel known to other people? That led to the description of a disciple as a follower of Jesus who has been transformed from the inside out and is continually being transformed by the work of Christ in them.

In my last message I shared the story about how Dr. Rankin, president of the International Mission Board, talked me out of becoming a missionary, and in the process he helped me realize that just because you have a passion to see the gospel spread among the nations doesn't mean you have to be a missionary. It simply means you're a Christian. Every follower of Christ should be zealous to see the gospel taken to the ends of the earth. Being a disciple means a person is driven to see the gospel go to all people, and as a result, they are themselves committed to making disciples.

As we saw in our last message, every follower of Jesus is called to be a fisher of men; that every disciple of Jesus makes disciples. It's not an optional command for a select few, but evangelism and disciple-making is for everyone. It is the Christ-commanded, Spirit-empowered duty for every disciple to proclaim the gospel. We should long to see people come to Christ, to see them baptized into the church and teach them to obey everything Christ has commanded us, so they might then join in making disciples themselves, until the nations are reached with the gospel. That's what we'll be talking about here: what it means to make disciples.

If I were to ask you to write down the answer to the question “How do you make disciples?” what would you write? What does that look like in your own life? Or maybe you would say, “I don't know if I've ever really made a disciple.” Let me encourage you to remember that Jesus has commanded this for all of us as His followers. We are to go and make disciples. We don't want to get to the end of our lives and, looking back, realize we haven't done this one thing He left for us to do.

After all, if the point of our lives was simply to know Him, He could have taken us home in the moment of our conversion. But He has left us here in a world of sin and evil and injustice for a reason. He's given us a mission which is to make disciples. So the question is: how do we do that? We'll be

looking at the specifics of His Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20, trying to boil it down to the essence of what it means to make disciples:

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We're going to look at the four core commands in this passage and how they play out practically in our lives. But even before we do that, I want us to realize that what He says first is very significant. He says, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...*" He's telling us a reality that will compel us to give ourselves to these core commands, the truth that He is Lord over everyone and everything. By this point He has lived a perfect life, He has died the death you and I deserved to die on the cross and He has risen from the dead in victory over sin. He is about to ascend into heaven and be seated at the right hand of God.

It's in this context that He says, "I have authority over everything in heaven and on earth." He is Lord. What had been prophesied in Daniel 7:13-14 is now reality. He has sovereign dominion over all rulers and nations everywhere. Which is a good reminder for us to remember that right now Jesus is Lord over everything with sovereignty, dominion and power over all people and rulers. He holds all kingdoms and powers and presidents in the palm of His hand. He is leading and guiding all of human history toward the end when, as Revelation 7 tells us, that every nation, tribe, tongue and people will gather around His throne and give God glory through Him. As it says in Philippians 2:9-11:

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Sometimes people will say, "I've come to the point where I've decided to make Jesus Lord of my life." Whenever you hear that, realize that person really never had a choice in the matter. Jesus isn't Lord because we choose to make Him that. He is Lord already. What we choose is whether we'll bow our knee to His Lordship now—or will we bow the knee to His Lordship when it's too late. He is Lord. That is a fact.

Think about what that means in our lives. As our Lord, our lives are His to direct. He determines where we go, how we live, what we do. This is what it means to be a disciple: we die to ourselves, surrendering our right to determine the direction of our lives. He determines where we live, how we live, what we do. He has commanded us to make disciples and He can lead us to do that in all kinds of

different ways. It might mean we stay where we are, or He might lead us to another part of the world. It's His call to make, not ours. Our lives are His to determine how we live. He is our Lord.

Remember, He's not just our Lord—He has all authority in heaven and on earth. He's Lord over every people group and every nation in the world. There are a lot of people in those nations who are not bowing their knee to Him as Lord—and this is why we do mission as followers of Christ. We know He is Lord, and we want to proclaim that all over the earth. We want to tell others of His goodness and greatness and glory and power and might and mercy. We want to proclaim His majesty and His judgment and His wrath and His love to the people around us where we live and to the people around the world. We're surrendered to His Lordship, and we want to proclaim His Lordship—this is what compels us to make disciples.

But how do we do this? Matthew 28:19-20 contains only one imperative verb (a command) in the original language and that is: "Make disciples." This is then surrounded by three participles: going, baptizing and teaching. That's where we can see three of the four components that make up the essence of the Great Commission.

Share the Word

The first component of disciple-making is that we are to go and share the Word. Jesus is telling His disciples on that mountain that they are to go and to share the gospel with people who have never heard it. That's the essence of evangelism, which is a fundamental part of disciple-making. Often in many of our discussions on discipling today, we disconnect it from evangelism. We'll be in "discipleship groups," but that is something separate from our gospel-sharing activities. We can be sure that when Jesus was talking to His disciples, He wasn't telling them to start discipling each other for the rest of their lives. He was telling to make the gospel known to other people so they would be led to Him.

We need to think practically. Who in your life are you sharing the gospel with? I think about our IMB missionaries around the world who live in very difficult places, even dangerous places. When someone comes to Christ there, it is often at great cost and risk. They can be totally rejected by their families. They can be persecuted by their families or by the government. They can be put in prison, or even lose their lives for trusting in Christ.

Often when those missionaries lead someone to Christ, they will encourage them that very day to do something specific. They tell them, "Make a list of all the people you know who don't know Christ." They could have many people in their sphere of influence, maybe even everyone they know. Then the next exhortation is, "Circle the five or ten people who are least likely to hurt or kill you if you share the gospel with them—and then start sharing it with them immediately."

In light of that picture, I want to encourage you as a follower of Christ: make a list of all the people in your sphere of influence who don't know Christ. It could be family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, people who either don't know Christ, or you don't know whether or not they know Him. Thankfully, most of these people on your list are not likely to threaten or kill you. But circle at least a few of them with whom you will be intentional to share the gospel over the next week or the next month. Pray for opportunities and for boldness to use those opportunities to actually share the greatest news in all the world with them. This is disciple making which we have been commanded to do, by sharing the gospel with others.

You need to realize that God has put these people into your life for a reason. He loves those people so much and He desires them to know Him. He loves them so much that He's put you in their lives with the opportunity to share the good news of Christ with them. Sharing the Word is where disciple-making starts...but it's not where it stops. We may have a tendency to think that evangelizing is an end in itself. Once someone has made the decision to receive Christ, we can think, "Okay, they're Christian now. Let's move on. Let's find someone else."

Show the Word

The next step in disciple-making, after evangelism, is showing the Word. We are to go to make disciples, then we are to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Why would baptism be so significant in the Great Commission? In the essence of disciple making, why is baptism so important? According to Scripture—Acts 2, Romans 6, Matthew 3—baptism is described as the public identification in our lives that we are followers of Christ. In baptism we identify with Him and with the gospel. Romans 6 tells us we are put in water as a picture of death to sin and self, then we are raised out of the water as a picture of being raised to life with Christ. We see in Ephesians 2 that baptism is a picture of being publicly identified with Christ's life, death, burial and resurrection, showing that we are now followers of Him.

But it goes even deeper. Not only are we identified with the life of Christ, but we're also identified with the body of Christ. Baptism takes place in the context of the church, joining a community of other believers who are also identified with Jesus. When we're baptized, we're saying, "I belong to Christ as a member of His body, the church." This is so significant in the process of disciple-making. We share the Word so they might believe the gospel, then we see them baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

They need to understand that their life is now identified not just with Christ but also with the community of faith—people who will help them grow in the life they now have in Christ. God has specifically designed churches as a place where His disciples can grow and mature, because they see in

the church what following Christ actually looks like. It is there that they come to see modeled the transformations that come with discipleship: the transformed mind, transformed affections, transformed will and transformed relationships.

Think about it this way: Imagine you were to lead somebody to Christ tomorrow. By God's grace you share the gospel with one of the people on your list—and they believe in Christ. How is that new believer going to begin to grow in Christ? How will they learn to study the Bible, for example? You could give them some books on Bible study, or recommend they go to a particular Bible study—and that would be helpful. But wouldn't it be far more helpful if you sat down with your Bible and told them how you personally study it: "I read a chapter of Scripture and here are the questions I ask to help me understand what I'm reading. Here are questions that help me apply what I read to my life. Here is how it affects the way I pray. Here's how it affects my decisions. Here's what I do when I don't understand something in the Word." In other words, you show them how to study the Bible. You show them what the life of Christ looks like in action, what it looks like to have Jesus' words abide in them by learning from you.

Or how is that believer going to learn to pray? You could give them some books on prayer, or maybe a sermon to listen to. And yes, those might be helpful. But wouldn't it be far more helpful to invite them into your quiet time and say, "I want to show you how I pray. I want to show you what I've learned about the role of praise in prayer, about confession in prayer, about intercession in prayer. When my mind starts to wander in prayer, here's how I've learned to stay focused." Again, you show them how to pray.

Think about all the facets of the Christian life, how can you show them how to follow Christ? Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a minute. In order to show somebody else how to study the Bible, I've actually got to know how to study the Bible myself. In order to show somebody else how to pray, I've got to be praying." You start to realize that God has designed disciple-making not just for others to grow in Christ, He's actually designed disciple-making for us to grow in Christ. God's got this whole thing rigged. He's designed disciple-making not only for others, but for you as well.

I'm convinced that every follower of Jesus will plateau in our relationship with Christ—we'll hit a ceiling—as long as we're just living for ourselves. But if we're living to see other disciples grow in the image of Christ, grow in the Word, grow in prayer, grow in evangelism, grow in disciple-making themselves, then we have to show them what all of these things are.

I remember the first time I ever shared the gospel. I was in middle school. A buddy of mine and I were out of school for the day and a mentor of mine called us up. "Hey, would you and your buddy want to go to the go-cart track and arcade and hang out for a few hours?" We're like, "Yeah, that's awesome." So we met him there. When we showed up, he had a video camera. We asked, "What's that for?" He said, "We're going to interview some of the other teenagers here at the go-cart place and arcade." My buddy

and I looked at each other, wondering if we were going to get to play any games or ride go-carts ourselves. But my mentor said, “Don’t worry—we’ll get to that.”

So we went around the place and he would ask teenagers what they believed about God, what they believed about spiritual things. Then he’d share the gospel with them while he videoed them. But after he asked a certain teenager some questions, he put the camera down and said to them, “It’s interesting what you’re saying, because my friend David here has a relationship with God through Jesus. David, why don’t you share with him what you know about Who Jesus is and what it means to have a relationship with God?”

All of a sudden, I was thrust into a situation where I had seen it modeled over the last few minutes and then it was my opportunity to do the same thing. So I started sharing the gospel with this teenager whom I’d never met until that point. I’m so thankful for somebody who showed me what it looks like to do evangelism. So how do people grow in Christ? They have to see what that growth looks like in others’ lives. That’s what the church is about, what disciple-making is about.

So let me encourage you to think about who you’re leading to Christ. That’s the first part—sharing the Word with others. But second, you have to show the Word. As people come to Christ, how are we showing them what it looks like to follow Him? And this leads to the third component of disciple-making, teaching them to obey what Christ has commanded us.

Teach the Word

How do you make disciples? You share the Word, you show the Word, then you teach the Word—teaching them to obey everything Christ has commanded. Don’t just think of teaching as standing in front of a group to give a sermon or lesson. Yes, that’s teaching. But what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 28 is more of an “as you go” teaching in the context of relationship.

Remember in Deuteronomy 6 where God speaks to His people about how His words should saturate their conversations when they’re walking on the streets or in their homes. Essentially it is passing what the Word has taught us on to others. Here’s my question for you: are you a receiver of the Word or are you a reproducer of the Word? To understand the difference, let’s go for a moment to South Sudan.

I remember sitting with a group of Christ-followers in a mud hut, teaching the Word to them. But the whole time, I hardly ever saw their faces. It wasn’t because they were dozing off or distracted. It’s because they were writing down every single thing I said as I was teaching the Word. They came up to me afterwards and told me, “We know we have a responsibility to take everything you’ve taught us, translate it into our tribes’ languages and teach it in our tribes.” They weren’t just listening to receive the Word—they were listening to reproduce it.

Come back now to a church service in America, where you have people sitting in church pews. While there are probably a few who are dozing off or looking around, many people are listening intently. Yet even then, they're often focused only on what they themselves can receive from what is being said. But if that's the only thing we're thinking about, we're missing the point of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. His Word isn't just for us—it's for others.

How do we listen in such a way that we're not just receiving, but that we can also reproduce it? How can we say, "Everything I'm learning about the Word isn't just intended for me, but it's to be passed on through me to other people whom I can help grow in Christ"? There are people in your families, in your workplaces, in your neighborhoods, even people in your church who need you to help them grow in Christ. Disciple-making means not letting the Word stop with us, but letting it spread through us.

I remember when I was pastoring my previous church, one day at the end of the message I was challenging them in this way. I had put on the "Notes" page in their bulletins: "Will the Word stop with you or will it spread through you?" The next Sunday a 19-year-old kid came up to me after the service and said, "Pastor, I want you to know how much that question last week convicted me. I don't want the Word to stop with me—I want it to spread through me." So he pulled up his arm and he had gotten tattooed the words "Will the Word stop with me or spread through me?" I thought, "Well, that will make me think twice about what I put in the sermon notes." I'm not recommending that you get this tattooed. In fact, I'm recommending that you not do that. But I am saying that you should let the Word of God be imprinted on your heart, so nothing will stop it from being taught through you to others who are growing in Christ.

This is disciple-making, when every disciple of Christ shares the Word, shows the Word and then teaches the Word. We're going, we're baptizing and we're teaching people to obey everything Christ commands. So those are the first three components, but there's a fourth.

Serve the World

What Jesus is telling us is that as we share and show and teach the Word, we are to do this in all the nations. So the fourth component of disciple-making is an intentional focus on seeing disciples made among all the peoples in the world. What's interesting is the word Jesus uses for "nations" is not nations like we think of them today; that is, as geopolitical entities. There are about 200 of these in the United Nations today. Back when He spoke these words, the United States of America and other such nations did not yet exist. The word He uses is *ethnee*, from which we get our idea of ethnic groups. Today we speak of "people groups" to describe what He's saying.

This makes sense. If you go to a major city in North America—New York City, for example—that's one city in one nation. But there are many different ethnicities, groups of people who speak

different languages and have different cultures. Yes, there are 200 or so geopolitical nations around the world, but anthropologists and missions scholars have identified over 11,000 distinct groups of people in the world, each sharing a common language and culture. Jesus commands us, as His disciples, to make disciples in every single “people group.” It’s not just a general command to make disciples among as many people as possible. It is a specific command to make disciples among every people group in the world.

This is why Dr. Rankin’s counsel to me was so important. “Just because you’re passionate about taking the gospel to the nations doesn’t mean you’re to be a missionary.” To be a follower of Jesus is to be passionate about seeing disciples made among all the people groups of the world. Each of us is to serve the world. We are to be constantly praying for the spread of the gospel to every people group in the world. We can also use resources such as [Operation World](#) or the [Joshua Project](#) or the International Mission Board app to be exposed to different people groups who have never heard the gospel.

How can you be part of this? Every morning, on your knees, bring specific groups before the Lord. Today I was praying for the people in northern Thailand, where there are over two million people with very few believers among them. In groups like this, pray that disciples will be made. Second, you can give of your resources for the spread of the gospel. And then, be open to going yourself. Maybe it would be just a short-term mission. Perhaps God will lead different ones of us for a week or two, here or there, to be a part of seeing disciples made in another part of the world.

Or perhaps for you it won’t be short term. In the IMB we have what are called “mid-terms.” This means going for a few months or a couple years. Maybe as a student you can spend a semester or a summer overseas. Maybe you can take a gap year or two and go somewhere in the world where you can see disciples made. Some of you might be open to long-term missions, moving your life to another place in the world. It’s not limited to the people who leave their jobs, sell everything and go—although God does call many people to do this. There are also opportunities for people to leverage their jobs. You can work and live in places like the Middle East or north Africa or southeast Asia, spreading the gospel while you have a job in these countries.

The bottom line is that every follower of Christ is intended to share the Word with people who don’t know Him. We’re to show others what it looks like to follow Him. We’re to teach others the Word God that has entrusted to us. Our ultimate aim is simply to tell God, “Here’s my life. I want to be a part of the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth however You want to use me, wherever You want me to go and whatever You want me to do. I want to be a part of making disciples in every nation.” If you pray that, you will find yourself walking in obedience to Jesus’ command and you’ll find yourself experiencing God’s design for your life and your family, as you become part of the greatest purpose in all the world: seeing the gospel spread to the ends of the earth.

That's why Jesus closed the Great Commission with this promise: "If you do this, I will be with you always, to the end of the age. You will experience the power of My presence at work in your life when you are giving yourself to this command, when you are making disciples. When you're sharing the Word, you'll need My presence and you'll see the power of My presence at work. When you're showing somebody else how to follow Me, leading them into baptism, gathering together with them in church, you will see My presence at work. When you're teaching the Word, you will see the power of My presence at work. And when you do these things in your community or around the world, you will see the power of My presence at work in you. Don't doubt for a second—I will be with you, and I will enable you to make disciples who will then make disciples."

This is God's plan for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it when His people are obeying this command, when we're giving ourselves to this plan. Disciple-making can be defined as the Christ-commanded, Spirit-empowered duty of every disciple of Jesus to evangelize unbelievers, baptize believers, teach them the Word of Christ, train them to obey Christ as members of His church and make disciples on mission to all nations. Share the Word, show the Word, teach the Word and serve the world. We are to do this until the day when disciples have been made in all the nations and we gather around the throne of our King, the Lord, and we give Him the praise He is due.

Let's pray.

God, help us to be faithful in this mission today in each one of our lives as we move forward to that day in eternity. O God, we're reminded that even before disciple-making was a command, it is a privilege we have to know You and to see others become followers of You and enjoy You. We want others to know Your grace and to see Your glory. Help us all, we pray, to be faithful to Your command to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. Don't let us get to the end of our lives as Christians who have done all kinds of good things in the church, but who have not given ourselves to this clear command. Help us to lead people to Christ and show them how to follow Christ and teach them to obey Christ. Do this until every people group in the world has disciples. May there be disciples from every nation giving You the praise and glory You are due as our Lord. Use us toward that end. Bless us toward that end, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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