

The Mission of Making Disciples

[Matthew 28:16-20](#)

Missio Dei: Messages from the Gospels and Acts on God's Work in the World

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Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Let us take a moment of quiet to prepare our hearts to hear a word from God. Not in the wind, not in the fire, not in the earthquakes, not in the floods, but your voice comes to us now in the stillness of our hearts through the hearing of your word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

We are looking very carefully at what it means to participate in the mission of God in the world. Jesus came to us, and he was on a particular mission. We have looked at the patterns of mission work in the world that include all of us. Every one of us is called to be a missionary of God. We know that part of that mission is about bringing justice to the world. Part of that mission is about bringing forgiveness to the world. Part of that mission is about proclaiming who Jesus is to the world and in the world.

Today we look at the mission that Jesus gave to all of us of making disciples in every part of the world. Sunday school has, for many decades now, been a place where we work at making disciples of our children, youth, and adults. Sometimes the children who hear the stories get it a bit wrong. At Sunday school they were teaching that God created everything, including human beings. Little Johnny seemed especially intent when they were told that Eve was created out of Adam's ribs. Later in the week, his mother noticed him lying down as if he were very ill. She said, "Johnny, what's the matter?" Johnny responded, "I have a pain in my side. I think I'm going to have a wife."

Two boys were talking as they walked home from Sunday school after a strong message on the devil. One said to the other, "What do you think about all this Satan stuff?" The other boy replied, "Well, you know how Santa Claus turned out. It's probably just your Dad."

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five- and six-year olds, and after explaining the commandment to honor thy father and mother, she asked, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat, one little boy said, "Thou shalt not kill."

Discipleship is what Jesus did, and discipleship is what Jesus invites us to do as mission to the world. Not too long ago I saw a public service announcement on television that went something like this: "Be a mentor to a child or young person. Studies have proven kids with adult mentors do much better in school, stay off drugs, don't get pregnant at an early age, go to college, and become more successful. Be a mentor and save a kid."

Mentoring and discipling are very closely linked. The next generation is hungry for adults who are balanced and healthy to mentor and lead them into the world. Kids who grow up without this kind of adult leadership and mentoring do not turn out as well. Recently, an article in *Newsweek* Magazine on the making of the Mormons asked the question why the Mormon Church is growing so fast. One of the major points is that the Mormon Church surrounds every family with a community of support so that the family can do everything it possibly can to raise children who are balanced and healthy and morally responsible in the world.

The Mormon Church is very powerful in parental empowerment. That should be a message to us in the church that one of our main responsibilities is to empower parents to make disciples of their children. Right across the page from this special article on the Mormons was a page entitled, "Marijuana could threaten your teen's success." The essence of the page was: Parents, pay attention. Draw some boundaries. Create some intentionality and say "no" to your children about smoking marijuana; it can do damage to their learning process. In other words, make disciples of them who grow up healthy and responsibly. Richard Foster and Dallas Willard, two major proponents of discipleship and Christian formation, said in a recent interview that the problem with the church today is a lack of intentionality around making disciples, forming Christians, and having people develop in their character to become like Christ. It doesn't happen with occasional sermons. It doesn't happen by being in a classroom. It doesn't happen because we watch other people preach or teach – it happens because we participate in making disciples. They reflect on one of the reasons why it doesn't happen in the church. It is because we often have an inadequate gospel that doesn't include disciple-making.

One of those inadequate gospels is: "The gospel is all about forgiving your sins. Once your sins are forgiven, live life." That's not adequate. Yes, the gospel includes forgiveness of sins, but there's a lot more to it than that.

The second inadequate gospel that they talk about has to do with the idea that discipleship is about being a good church member – going to the right meetings and doing the right things. They said that's an inadequate gospel; it doesn't deal with discipleship.

A third inadequate gospel is that gospel is about ethical social action. The inadequacy of that gospel is that it says nothing about interior, responsible character development that grows out of a person's heart. Their whole point is that we have tended to get lost in what we would call "gospels of sin management." We know what we're against more than what we are preparing people to be for.

It is important that we help people in faith – children, youth and adults – to engage faith that is active and responsible, pro-active and positive in the world. Yes, it includes sin management, but that's not the end of it. Dallas Willard goes on to say in his book, *Divine Conspiracy*, that when Jesus deals with moral life he does not theorize or philosophize about it; he digs into the guts of human existence: rage, contempt, hatred, obsession, lust, divorce, manipulation, revenge, coercion, slapping, suing, cursing, spitting, and begging. Can it get any more raw than that?

The point is not all those things, though (and don't do those things). The point is that Jesus says, "Here is a life pattern to begin to live and to work on as a disciple that will literally lead you away from all those things." Jesus expects us to change. Not to become perfect, but as he says in one place in the Sermon on the Mount, "to become perfect, increasingly perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect, to become mature and complete and whole."

Now, I've heard in the past that you really can't believe that verse. Jesus was overstating the hyperbole; he can't possibly expect that we're going to keep moving on toward perfection. That's one of the problems: we don't really believe that people can change. Discipleship is about believing people can change and helping them to make those changes. Discipleship is not just about making converts. It's not just about being forgiven. It's not just about recruiting church members or being involved in social action or proselytizing or listening to a good sermon or good teaching. Discipleship is about walking with a few people over a long period of time to help their lives be better, in the name of Jesus.

Willard says a disciple is someone who has decided to be with another person in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is. In other words, when Jesus invited disciples to come and follow him, he expected that they would pay attention to who is he, what he was doing, and what he said, and that it would change their lives so that they would begin to practice what he was.

Discipleship is learning to live the life of Jesus in the world. It is by relationship. It is learning to live that life at home, at work, at business, at school, at church, in entertainment, at leisure, in sports, while driving, in marriage and parenting, and in all leadership roles. Discipleship is about how to put faith into practice wherever we find ourselves during the day or night. Discipleship is walking together. It is sharing life together. It is about guidance and coaching, teaching, showing younger people what to do, giving them guidance and watching out for them to see how they are doing. It is about listening and asking questions, learning and growing and changing. And you say, "Well, that's all the parents' responsibility."

Well, here's one of the problems: Most parents don't have a clue about how to do this. They come to the church with this question: "Will you please help me bring my child up to become a person who will follow Jesus Christ?" Or, perhaps more often, they say, "Please teach my kids some moral development." The parents are hungry for help, and there are a lot of kids who don't have parents who can help them. So this is a lot about how parents need to disciple their children and how we, as adults, turn and work with children and youth who do not have parents who can do this.

What is disciple-making? It's aligning ourselves to every aspect of life so the kingdom of God infiltrates those parts of our lives. It's connecting faith to every step along the way. It's constantly turning into what God is saying as we live. It's asking the question, "Lord, how would you have me live today, at this moment, make this decision and move in the direction you want me to move?" Discipleship is about helping people become disciples. Disciple-making cannot be done alone; it cannot be done quickly; it cannot be done with a narrow focus of just a few things; it cannot be done judgmentally; it cannot be done in a classroom or a sanctuary. Discipleship is about real life, person-to-person, walking together for extended periods of time.

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples." That's impossible to do unless the entire body of Christ takes the responsibility to participate in the mission. It's a life-long communal, whole-life process of helping people grow in their faith. Why is disciple-making so important today? Just a few thoughts about our culture: the church is less and less effective as a presence in the culture. The church is marginalized. The church has less and less to say to people who are in the culture. We are less and less affected by the Judeo-Christian tradition in our culture; people literally grow up without a clue about who God is.

The family is not a stable place today, in many cases. The family is marginalized and fragmented. Parents are stressed and over-worked, over-committed, and there is no time to focus on faith. People are tending to be passive observers in their response to what goes on as a spectator sport in terms of faith development. Let's come and watch the preacher or watch the choir. Let's come and watch the missionary slides. Let's come and watch others do the discipleship. Passive parishioners. There is an emphasis on private faith. "It's none of your business what I do with my personal life. It's only my business. It's between me and God. You have nothing to say to me, and I have nothing to say to you." Biblical illiteracy. People don't have a clue of what is in the Bible. Just the basics of the Ten Commandments. Just the basics of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. And one of the major issues is that we pastors are so busy doing other things that we don't help you make disciples. The number one job of a pastor, in my opinion, is to help people make disciples, because that is the essence of the mission in the world.

One of the things our Godparents' ministry does in this church is to help parents help their children be formed in faith in a practical way. That's why we have godparents in this church. One of the reasons we have Sunday school is because we want to empower parents to work with their children to make disciples. We make disciples the way Jesus did. The statement in Matthew about the mission of Jesus to make disciples comes at the end of the gospel and, when Jesus says, "Go and make disciples," you can almost hear the disciples say, "Well, how are we going to do that?" And you can hear the quiet voice of Jesus saying, "The way I did it." Matthew is expecting that we see this book as a discipleship-training manual that we look back through to see how Jesus made disciples. I believe there are many ways discipleship becomes effective in our lives. One of the significant ways we do that is through music. Music and sports, in fact, can include a person's entire range of emotional, physical, mental and spiritual being. Music engages the mind and the heart in a structured and disciplined way so much so that the Wesleys, Charles and John, wrote literally thousands of hymns to make disciples of people who didn't know who Jesus was.

Today we recognize, in the second service, Mary Jackson Cathey, and I have heard her say, and a lot of other people have reminded me that she says: "How will children ever be in the church as adults if they are not there when they are young? How will they learn to worship? How will they learn to sing hymns? How will they ever learn to love the church and Jesus unless they are present with their parents?" It is important to recognize that we, in our own lives, have been affected by other people who took time to make disciples of us.

I've done some reflecting on this in my own life. When I was in high school, one of the counselors drew me into the office to talk to me about needing more balance in my life. (That seems to be a message that I get on frequent occasions. You probably do, too.) He expressed concern that I had only academics. I was taking all the top academic courses because I wanted to be a physics major. He said, "You need balance in your life, Gareth. I have a suggestion for you. Let's sing 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' right here in the office." And I thought, "He's nuts." But he had method to his madness. He started singing in a wonderful tenor voice. He got me to sing, and we sang a round. We sang another round, and he said, "You have a great voice. Why don't you come and sing with me in the choir?" and he had me hooked.

What I did not know was that, as a teacher in the public school, he used the opportunity to reach out to his choir members to mentor them in life. As a responsible disciple, he was a wonderful Christian man who taught us early on to sing Mendelssohn and to become disciples. He didn't say, in overt ways, "I'm a Christian and you need to know Jesus." It was all actually quite subversive. But we knew that this man was a man of faith, and he wanted us to become people of faith.

I was in my senior year in college, and I had just been told by one of my composition teachers that I would never be a good writer. I like it when teachers tell me what I can't do in the future. I was pretty down, and I got into the next class called Advanced Composition, and I had a teacher who was a person of faith. She said, "Gareth, I know you are struggling with writing, but I believe it's in you. I'm going to help you become a good writer." And she meticulously walked me through the process of pulling out of me that which was truly there, and learning the disciplines of writing and describing my faith to the point that I was selected to be one of the graduation speakers because I had written such a good speech. That's discipleship. She didn't have to do that; she took time. It is important to realize that you have people in your life who have taken the time to disciple you in your faith development in all the issues of life. And if you don't have those people, then you are probably not a person who achieved a very good balance.

One of the great advantages in my life was growing up in a family where my Dad took the Bible seriously. He said the Bible was very important. He read it all the time. He taught it as a lay teacher, and he expected us, as members of the family, to pay attention to it. I didn't memorize any of it, but I know that it is very, very important, because my Dad took the time to disciple me around the scriptures. I could go on and on. The reality of it is that we are in a world that is starved for that kind of personal attention, and Jesus is saying, "Go into the world and give people personal attention to help them grow in their faith." And so it is that we, in this church, will invest our futures in helping parents do that with their children, and helping adults do that with the next generation, and helping adults do that with each other.

Are you making money more than you are making disciples? Are you making decisions more than you are making disciples? Are you making yourself a spectator to watch other people do the spiritual work or are you making disciples? Are you mentoring some young people you know are being nurtured by your own discipleship? Hear the words of Jesus: "Go into the world and make disciples." It is your mission if you are a follower of Jesus.

Let us pray. Gracious God, let us now see clearly the mission of Jesus. Let us be disciples of Jesus, and let us make disciples of Jesus. Give us the power of your spirit, the authority of Jesus' presence in the world as we determine to do this, not on our own abilities, but on your goodness and grace. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.