

Part 5: Tempered for Guidance

Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus' Pathway of Discipleship

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Sunday, June 18, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us continue in prayer. Fairest of all, Lord Jesus Christ, may we now hear the word that you speak to us. May we now see you at the center of all creation, high and lifted up, Son of God and Son of Man. May this word bring glory, honor, praise and adoration to you. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. It is on Father's Day that there are more collect calls than on any other day of the year. Dads, you are paying the bill. There is a spiritual reality to that which is important to this text; that is: Dads and Moms, you are to pay the bill—the cost of discipleship—for your children. Adults, we are to pay the bill for the cost of discipleship for the next generation. We are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus who paid the ultimate price in laying down his life for all. We are called to bear pain in the pattern of Jesus, and to show the next generation what it means not to inflict it, but to carry it—to take up our cross, deny ourselves, and to show the next generation the power of that kind of life. Those of us who follow Jesus are invited to be disciples. We have been talking about that pathway of discipleship for the past several weeks. Long-term discipleship always culminates in making other disciples. You cannot call yourself a mature disciple unless you are involved in the process of making other disciples. When Jesus went into the world to make disciples of all nations, he was not talking about the work of missionaries only. He was talking about every person who follows after him who believes in the name of Jesus. I was visiting an African American church of some size last week in Landover, Maryland. They have 7,000 in attendance on Sunday morning, and their focus for their entire life together is: disciples who make disciples—living into discipleship, discipline, and duplication. The core of discipleship is that we will duplicate the works of Jesus. We will duplicate what Jesus has invested in us, and we will turn it over to the next generation. How did Jesus make disciples? He walked with them. He paid the early price of facing the devil in the wilderness and met temptation. Out of that temptation and the testing period, he invited others to follow him. It was out of his own experience of the testing and the toughness of life that Jesus turned and invited others to follow him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God; he did not proclaim himself. There is an irony: Jesus always pointed to the Father. Our opportunity as disciples is always to point to Jesus, as Jesus pointed to the Father.

Jesus called attention to the Father in all things. He invited the disciples to follow him as he followed the Father. Jesus called the disciples into communities, and into groups. Jesus invited them into a new family where they were brothers and sisters together. Jesus taught Kingdom values to them as they walked together on the dusty roads. Jesus showed them how to heal and confront evil. Jesus practiced prayer on a daily basis; the disciples saw him go away in the cool of the morning when it was still dark, to pray. Jesus was willing to ask them questions and to give the disciples opportunity to ask questions. It was in the questioning process that the disciples fully engaged Jesus. Jesus called them to face the cross, to take up their cross daily, and to deny themselves. Jesus was always looking toward the resurrection. In order to get to the resurrection, he had to suffer and die. Jesus lived the pattern of discipleship.

There is a predictable pathway of discipleship, as shown to us in the gospel of Matthew. It is an invitation, as Jesus said, to “become perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” He doesn't mean that any of us, as human beings, will ever be perfect like Jesus. But it means there is a commitment for the person who follows Jesus to go into maturity in greater and greater ways—to be finished, to be completed, to never give up, and—even if we turn back—to turn around and restore the discipleship process.

We have reviewed how that happens when Jesus touches us personally with his grace, as he invites us into community, and we are able to follow Jesus in small groups and families. We have seen how Jesus places us into teams of people who venture into mission. Mitch Gore just described how he is going into mission with several of our young people. He sees what happens to them as they change in their discipleship because they are out and among the nations, wrestling with faith. Jesus invites the disciples to go through periods of being tested with grief; to deal with the losses and the crosses of life. Jesus brings them to the place where he comes: and that is beyond the suffering, the pain, and the death, to being in the

resurrection; and having taken the temperance of God's pressure, to transform that into a new life where they can turn their discipleship over to someone else.

Jack and Judy Balswick, in their book, *Parent Empowerment Training*, say that the number one purpose of parents is to disciple their children. Parents, are you intentionally making disciples of your children? I have some parents who consistently come and say, "Well that is the church's job. I don't have a clue." The church is a partner in that, but the church is here to empower you, as parents and grandparents, to turn and make disciples of your children. In order for that to happen, you must be a disciple yourself. You cannot abdicate that responsibility to the church, as if the church can somehow take responsibility for parenting; that does not work. The Balswicks' point out that there is a developmental process in parenting that makes disciples: it is the modeling of faith. It is the teaching of the important aspects of faith values. It is the coaching of young people as they begin to exercise faith on their own, and it is supporting the young adult to go into the world and try out their faith—to experiment, and to walk with Jesus on their own. And it is ultimately the partnership of parents with their children to be adults together in the Heavenly Father's house. Parents, your job is to make disciples who grow up to become mature and become your partners—who are no longer dependent upon you, but who depend upon God.

After a time of testing, after a time when there are hard places and conflicts, or even tragedy, there may be lingering doubts where you wonder, as a parent or as a follower of Jesus, whether you are going to make it in faith. There may be a time of asking difficult questions—walking through painful places—where you may be tempted to give up, or bail out. There may be a place where you come to an end of yourself, and you realize that the only presence is not you, but Jesus Christ. It is in that recognition of the test that you come to the completion of what discipleship can mean for you; and that is, the realization it is not you—it is all about Jesus Christ. It is in those times when we confess our failures, our sins, and mistakes, that we realize that, unless it is Jesus who gives us grace, we don't have a chance to make it into the future. It is at that point where our children and those who follow us see that faith can be sustained, even when hell breaks forth.

It is during such times that we become tempered. We become completed and hardened—toughened for helping other people to discover who Jesus is. We've lived through the wilderness; we've weathered the storms of life. We've been tempted by the fires of trouble. We have become a veteran disciple. We have experienced some deeper healing, and some restoration to a new life; and we are ready to be a parent to a disciple who can grow to maturity. How sad it is when we, as parents, are less mature than our own children. It is at a place in our experience of being tested that we release our superficiality...our triviality...our irritability...our defensiveness...our judgmentalism... and our need to control...and we become like Jesus, who gives away the power. My Dad made a disciple of me. It was not his controlling patterns of life (and he had some) that made a disciple of me. It was not necessarily all his religious words that made a disciple of me. It wasn't the fact that he showed up in church every week that made a disciple of me. When we got right down to it, it was the fact that my Dad was willing to endure the difficulty and pain of life and still come out with faith in Jesus Christ. He modeled a committed life. He read the Bible faithfully. He loved my Mom, and still does. He discussed faith with us almost every day, in some way. He invested in the church, in his personal prayer life. And he invested in small faith communities in our home where I could see them gather together and wrestle with issues of faith: reading the scriptures, and asking the hard questions. I saw it myself, and that made me a disciple. He encouraged me with singing hymns, and with wonderful classical music. He even mentored other pastors. He showed me the pathway to following Jesus.

When you look to your parents, do you believe that your parents have given you the gift of discipleship? When you look at your children, are you giving them the gift of discipleship? Disciple-making is about presence; it's about an attentive, listening relationship with the one who follows Jesus—an exertion of love and willingness to give direction at the right times. It is not control. It is not putting demands on people. It is not condemnation, or blaming, or shaming, or calling people names because they don't measure up. It is not belittling or manipulating. It is modeling the faith; it is affirming the person to follow Jesus. It is speaking the truth in love.

Some of us do not even know what discipleship is because we haven't paid attention. Follow Jesus in Matthew and you will see discipleship in action. At a crucial point in my life when I was floating in my

faith, I had no sense of being anchored or rooted in a particular faith tradition. I had come out of the Pentecostal, Baptist, and Church of Christ in community church histories; I was 'all over the place.' A theologian by the name of Ray Anderson took me under his wing and said, "I will mentor you into the Reformed faith." Because he took seven hours a week to teach me Reformed theology—Bonhoeffer, Barth, Berkouwer—I was able to rethink my faith. He disciplined me in a way of thinking about Jesus. He disciplined me in a life pattern. I sat there with him in classes, and I rode with him to-and-from class. As we shared that time, I asked, "Is it all right if I talk to you as we ride together?" And he said, "Use me, or lose me." He was willing to give his life away. I can tell you today that I am here in large part because of the discipleship of Ray Anderson.

Discipleship is an action of moving people from their discipleship in their lives to leadership. A disciple is not complete until the disciple is willing to lay down his life for another; and laying down one's life for another is an act of leadership. It involves leading another into the Kingdom. It means leading another to see Jesus clearly; leading another to experience scripture and to read it well; leading another to active faith in the Living God. That is discipleship: to show another the way to Jesus, and to walk the way with Jesus. And when one has walked a long way, it is inevitable that discipleship will lead to leadership. There is no completion of discipleship unless one begins to turn to others and lead them as well; this is the act of leadership.

Leadership is not primarily about leading big organizations or systems; it is primarily about leading another human being to encounter God. That is the core process of leadership in scripture and in faith history. Max DePree has put it this way in his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, "Leaders do not inflict pain, but bear pain." Discipleship is not about showing others that you are in pain, but about showing others how to bear the pain. Sometimes we get that confused. In America today, we have the wrong view of leadership. We have a view that leadership is more about charisma, and less about character. That is just the opposite of what scripture teaches us about discipleship. We believe, in America today, in the ascent of the immature...the exaltation of the shallow... the triumph of the trivial...and the beatification of the beautiful. We believe that the crowd is more important than the community of love. We worship the idol; we adore the adolescent; we sacrifice to the superficial; we are charmed by the childish; and we are mesmerized by the magical—but we are not disciplined by character.

Sometimes we believe that talent is more important than being tempered. We believe that one who tampers with one's body to make it more beautiful is more important than the one who is tempered in the soul—Botox over spirituality. Character over charisma is a thing of scripture; it is a thing of Jesus. The American call to leadership is about personality, talent, beauty, success, and winning; we call it an 'American idol,' and we worship it.

Discipleship leads to the development of good character and the fulfillment of the soul: wholeness and maturity; the inner life; testing and integrity; courage under fire; stability; durability; patience; perseverance and persistence; endurance; sustaining ability in the difficult times; gentleness and temperance.

In The Oregonian newspaper, there was an article about Tiger Woods after his Friday bail out of the U.S. Open. He was twelve over par, and didn't make the cut. A lot of people thought he just wasn't going to make it any more due to the loss of his father. But I think that this particular newspaper got it right. It said:

Tiger refused to make excuses or blame his poor performance on the nine weeks in mourning for the loss of his Dad, his best friend. He wasn't bitter. Even though he had bailed out, he'd bombed out from the Open, he still had hopes to go on and win the British Open. He honored Earl Woods, not because he won the U.S. Open, but because he failed, and he showed us character.

And I have to say, in everything I've read about Earl Woods, his closest relationship with Tiger was not about his talent as a golfer—it was about whether or not he was going to be a person of substance and character. Dad raised a self-respecting, well-rounded, well-adapted human being blessed with good perspective. I believe that newspaper article has gotten it right.

The essence of discipleship is not primarily about how talented our kids are, or how well educated they may be. It is how we help them to be formed into the full image of Jesus Christ. They are tempered, because we are tempered, like steel. It is that ancient forging process of being hammered into a form by hand—as if the hand of God were to personally form us—to deepen us, and to cause us to be strengthened by a force applied from without, to assure that we are stronger within. The yielding point reached when metal is reformed into a new shape, is not to fracture us, but to build us up.

In his book, *Transforming Grace*, that is being passed out today, Jerry Bridges talks about this—that grace is the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of our transformation. We cannot be transformed and tempered unless grace is present as we go through the hard places of life. “Life is difficult,” he says. “Grace is to strengthen us to endure when life is hard.” It is not enough just to survive, but to thrive in the midst of the pain. Grace is sufficient when we are weak. That is the teaching of the apostles in the pattern of Jesus. The wilderness tests us and disciplines us; God uses the pain to strengthen us. When you read Jerry Bridges’ book, *Transforming Grace*, you will see that the emphasis is all upon Jesus’ presence to make us disciples, and to temper us for the purpose of turning and making disciples of others.

Robert Buford, author of the book, *Halftime* (subtitled *Success to Significance*), was a very wealthy tycoon out of the cable TV industry. Everything was going perfectly for him until his son died trying to swim across the Rio Grande River. It changed Bob Buford’s life. And out of that difficult loss—the pain of that experience when he was so close to his son—he began to turn toward what God had called him to do in life, which was to help disciple other people personally, and in churches. Probably there is no other person more singularly responsible for the huge transformation of churches to engage in discipleship in this age than Bob Buford, through Leadership Network. It is important that we take discipleship seriously. Just a couple of weeks ago I was with a family whose father and mother had worked very hard with their three children to bring them up in following Jesus. A clear demonstration to me was to see the daughter, who is still in a wheelchair from acute cerebral palsy, and to see how her two brothers gathered around her and loved her. They were not resentful of her; they did not pay too much attention to her. But because the parents had modeled a fair way to parent all three children, they loved their sister. The oldest son took her to her senior prom. His girlfriend was with him, and they made the prom event a great opportunity for her to celebrate life. They took her wheelchair out onto the dance floor, and they whirled her around in the wheelchair and danced around her so that she could personally experience what it meant to celebrate life. They learned that from their parents, who both love Jesus and believe that the core of Jesus’ identity is to lay down their lives for their children.

And so it is today that we have the opportunity to be tempered for the purpose of providing guidance for the next generation. Let us take this seriously as a church and as families, for there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of young people within a mile of this church who are asking for mentoring and support... education and training... who are asking for someone to turn and care for them who has the tempered wisdom to do so. Jesus said, “Go into all of the world and make disciples.” So today we encourage you to do what the apostle Paul did as he encouraged the church in Ephesus: “Christ gives you gifts to equip saints and disciples for the work of service, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us have come to the unity of faith, to the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the full stature of Christ, so that we will no longer be children blown about by every wind of thought. Speaking the truth in love, let us grow up in every way into him who is the head of the church—that is, Jesus Christ.”

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, may you make this so in our midst. May you give us a spirit of willingness to be tempered in the midst of the struggle so that we might help others to follow you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.