

**Core Seminar**

**Discipling**

**Class 1: What Is Discipling?**

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If you have been a Christian for very long you have probably heard words like “disciple” and “discipling” used in a number of different contexts. As we begin this morning it might be helpful to get a better understanding of the images and ideas that those words bring to mind. What do you think of when you hear the word “disciple?” What does the word “disciple” bring to mind for you? *[Answers may include: discipline, follower, imitator, Jesus’ disciples, one-on-one relationships, etc]*

Clearly there are a lot of ideas about what a disciple may be. Most essentially, in the Bible a disciple is presented as someone who follows after the life and teaching of another. In fact, as we will consider in more detail shortly, the last command that Jesus gave to his followers was the command to go and make disciples Matt 28:16-20). As followers of Jesus ourselves, we have a keen interest in knowing how we can best be obedient to that command – to go and be about the work of making disciples - what we’ll refer to as the work of “discipling.”

1. **What is a DISCIPLE?**

We need to start by considering biblically what some of the marks of a disciple may be.

Certainly we may be tempted to look only at the first disciples or the twelve disciples spoken of in the New Testament. But they often had a unique role that may not be fully transferable to us. However, if we look through the broader witness of Scripture we can get a pretty good picture of what we are aiming at when we talk about disciple making.

What are some general marks of a disciple of God?

* Response to God’s initiating call (Mark 1:16-20 )
* A desire to know what God says. (Job 23:12; Jer. 15:16; Deut. 6:5-7; Rom. 10:17; I Pet. 2:2)
* A break from the world’s standards. (I Cor. 10:13; II Cor. 5:17)
* Self-discipline. (Gal. 5:22-23; Matt. 16:24; Luke 3:11; I Cor. 9:25-27)
* A desire to seek and encourage with other disciples. (Rom. 15:5-6; Acts 2:42; Eph. 3:17-19; Heb. 10:25; I Pet. 1:22; I John 1:2, 7)
* Passion for Evangelism. (I John 3:16-24; I Pet. 2:21; II Cor. 9:6-7; Philip. 1:21; Matt. 10:32; John 14:12)
* Perseverance. (Philip. 3:13-14; I John 1-4; Ps. 37:23-24; Rom. 6:1-14; II Pet. 1:1-10; John 5:37-39)

We won’t spend a lot of time here just now. But these are just some of the traits in a disciple that we would seek to encourage if we are at work trying to make biblically faithful disciples.

1. **The LARGER CONTEXT for DISCIPLING—the LOCAL CHURCH**

While it helps to know the outline of what a disciple looks like, but we also need to know what “discipling” looks like, according to the Scriptures. We could come up with a lot of different definitions of the work of discipling. There is not a single authoritative definition given in one place in Scripture. Rather, the disciple-making process is so critical to the message of the Bible that we find the theme running through the whole of Scripture. In the Old Testament we see God’s people regularly commanded to constantly disciple one another by reminding each other of God’s faithfulness and talking about his deeds, especially his rescue of them in the Exodus from Egypt. In the New Testament we see the disciple making process begun in the ministry of John the Baptist as he prepares men and women for the coming Christ. We see it in Christ’s work as he calls out and trains his initial followers. We see it as the church forms in the book of Acts to implement the risen Christ’s command to “go and make disciples.” We see it in the Epistles as the church grows in her understanding of the disciple making task, both for the church as a whole and for individual believers.

As we talk about discipling, we need to also define the scope of what we have in mind. For the most part, in this class we will be talking about relational or one-on-one discipling—you relating to another person or two with the aim to do them good spiritually. But that is not the whole of how disciple-making takes place. It’s not even the most important way that disciple-making takes place. **Think of discipling on a much larger scale—what we do together as a church** in our public worship services. At its core discipling is what will happen, Lord willing, in just a little while when a preacher stands before us and expounds God’s Word to us. Disciple-making is what the church does in the songs we sing, in the Scripture that’s read, in the weekly opportunities to serve together and encourage one another, in the relationships of accountability that it fosters, and in the mutuality of gifts and love that make up the body of Christ on earth. In one sense, the church body is a greenhouse that God himself has constructed to grow and cultivate disciples of Christ, to the glory of God the Father. What we are talking about in this class (i.e., one on one discipling) is one of the many tools God employs in his greenhouse (i.e., the local church) and it should not be considered in isolation to the others.

Every believer is called to the work of discipling. Only a few will be called upon to preach; only a few will lead public worship; or even teach large groups. However, it is the contention of this class that every Christian is called by God to contribute to the disciple-making work of the church through deliberate, mutually encouraging relationships. This is primarily what we are thinking about in this class—the interpersonal relating to other people that we ourselves can initiate. Keep in mind, one on one discipling should not be thought of as distinct from the larger work of the local church. One-on-one discipling relationships must always fit within the broader biblical context of the disciple-making work of the church.

1. **What is DISCIPLING?**

Having said that, let’s now consider what 1-on-1 or relational discipling looks like. Based on the synthesis of biblical truth, I think one way we could helpfully define the work of discipling as: *The intentional encouragement of Christians on the basis of deliberate, loving relationships and training in God’s Word.*

While our definition is not authoritative, it is important. The key words in this definition may be helpful to focus on:

* Discipling is INTENTIONAL and DELIBERATE – it is not something that just happens, it is the result of purposeful initiative on the part of other Christians.
* Discipling involves ENCOURAGEMENT – Christians need encouragement in order to be faithful and to persevere in their faith.
* Discipling is focused on making followers of Jesus, i.e. CHRISTIANS – not on just general moral reformation or even worse, copies of yourself.
* Discipling is ultimately rooted in the WORD of GOD – not just our good advice.
* Discipling is LOVING – to care for someone’s soul in this way IS love.
* And finally, discipling is RELATIONAL it involves more than just watching a lesson on video – it involves humans sharing our lives with others.

To better understand this topic I want us to spend the remainder of this class thinking about a few key components of this definition and some implications.

**First, biblical discipling is *intentional* and *deliberate*.**

These are words that you are going to hear a lot in this class – intentional, or deliberate. But we need to understand that making disciples is not something that just happens, it is the result of Christians responding in obedience to an imperative command of God. The command to make disciples is not merely some strategy that we have dreamed up to grow this church. Rather, this is at the core of the work that Jesus gave to his redeemed people (the church) as he prepared to return to the right hand of the Father. Recall the charge in Matthew 28:18-20.

***Matthew 28:18-20*****18***And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.* **19***"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,* **20***teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (NASB)*

This is not a charge simply to tell the Gospel message, but to make disciples. That is to be the focus of our evangelism – disciple-making. Jesus instructs his disciples to turn and make disciples of others. They are not to make disciples of themselves, but of Jesus. Just as He had done, they were to purposefully invest their lives in teaching others to follow Christ.

And that is what we understand that we are called to do as Christians—to give ourselves intentionally / deliberately / on purpose to relationships with others in order to help them become mature followers of Christ. This is not just the work of special individuals either. Throughout the Scripture we see that all of God’s people are called to encourage one another as a mark of their own discipleship of God.

In Hebrews chapter 10 the writer to the Hebrews tells all the Christians receiving his letter “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” (Heb. 10:24) Notice that he says “us” and “one another”. This spurring on in the Christian life is presented here, and throughout the Scriptures, as a normative work of God’s people, not just a few paid professionals. And did you also notice the words “consider” and “spur”. This is not merely something that happens if it happens, but something that the writer tells us to “consider” to think about, to strategize for, to deliberately work toward with the purpose of “spurring” our brothers and sisters forward in love and growth as Christians.

We could go on, but I hope you get at least a little taste of the biblical truth that disciple making is not passive. To be faithful to the call to make disciples we are called to jump into the work intentionally and deliberately.

**Second, biblical discipling is *relational*.**

The idea that *discipling is relational* is interwoven through much of the Old and New Testaments. In the Scriptures we see a God who is not merely revealed, but a God who is relational. Throughout the Bible we see God revealing himself not merely to convey information, but in order to reveal truth that results in a relationship with him. At every turn we see a God who is moving intentionally, deliberately toward ever deeper and more meaningful levels of relationship with his people—from the appearance of his Law in the Exodus, to the promise of God with us in Isaiah, to the appearance to an incarnate Christ in the Gospels, culminating in face-to-face, unmediated fellowship with God described in Revelation.

Perhaps the reason that the process by which we work to build up God’s people is so relational is that it pictures and describes the larger truth of the relational nature of God. We see this relational focus through the biblical description of God’s assembled children in the local church. These assemblies are described as “households”, “bodies”, “buildings” – images that picture the interrelation and integrated workings of distinct parts. The simple transfer of information is not sufficient. The church is called to relate to one another in order to add a distinct relational aspect to everything it does, even one-on-one discipling.

Just as with many other things in church life, one-on-one discipling is to take place in the context of loving, encouraging, Christ-centered relationships. By this we get to know the life, the struggles and the giftings of one-another. By this we build a church culture of mutual edification.

**Third, bibilical discipling is *loving*.**

Intentional relational discipling is not cold and utilitarian, rather it is near the very essence of how God has called us to love one another within his church. We are called to deliberately pour out our lives for the spiritual good of others, just as Christ poured out his life for our eternal good. Certainly Christ did for us what we could never do for one-another, he bore our sins as a perfect sinless substitute – we can’t do that. Still, we are called in our imperfect and fallen state to picture that perfect love of Christ. How? By pouring out our lives for the spiritual good of others, for their encouragement and blessing. That is what the Bible describes as love between Christians.

The Apostle John says it clearly in 1 John 3:16 *By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.* (ESV)

What does it mean to say that Jesus “lay down his life for us?” Well it can’t be referring to his atoning work…because we can’t imitate that in our relationships with others. It must mean something else, something that we as humans can imitate. Given that, I think it’s clear that he is looking at the way Jesus poured out his life, not in death but in discipling.

Why did Jesus lay down his life for us? To glorify God and to do us good spiritually. To teach, model, encourage and love his disciples.

We should picture that love in our own small ways by laying down our lives for others with the goal of glorifying God and doing them good. That is what it means to love.

**Fourth, biblical discipling involves *training in God’s Word*.**

Discipling involves *training*. It has both content to convey and application to make. Yet this training cannot be in just anything. What we teach people and win them to is what they spend the rest of their life contemplating and doing. If we teach people to rely on themselves or turn to the things of this world, they will never find God.

Discipling must be rooted in the *Word of God*. It is God’s Word that brings life, and not the discipler’s sage advice. Scripture’s self-attestation to its power and ability to transform is evident throughout the entire canon.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 *16All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.* (NASB) (cf. Isaiah 55:10-11; James 1:21; 2 Peter 1:3-4).

In its simplest form, disciple-making is the daily task of pointing others to God’s Word. As disciplers, we work hard to not cultivate a dependence on ourselves; rather, we train Christians to consistently turn to the Scriptures.

1. **BIBLICAL DISCIPLING IS BEING A PIPELINE**

 To better understand the concept of discipling let’s consider the image of a conduit for pouring spiritual blessings into the life of another person.

My son loves construction equipment. He marvels when a crane takes a piece of pipeline, hoists it into the air and lays it between adjoining pieces of pipeline.

The purpose of a pipeline is to move fluid along in the direction it should go, making sure it gets from the source to the intended destination. *Biblical discipling is very much like being a pipeline.* Christians who root themselves in God’s truth are in a position to do good to others. God uses Christians as conduits for his truth. We take in God’s truth, learn to live by it, and then pass it on to others.

[Illustration: ON THE ONE END IS CUP WITH THE WORD “GOD’S TRUTH” AND WATER OVERFLOWING INTO THE PIPELINE; ON THE PIPE IS THE WORD “YOU”; ON THE OTHER END IS THE PIPE IS A CUP THAT HAS THE WORD “OTHERS”]

Pipes do not have a lot to be proud about (1 Cor 4:7; Gal 6:14). The work of a pipe is simply to be in the right place, channeling God’s truth to others. Are you a pipeline?

1. **PROCESS, NOT PROGRAM**

Why might it be easy to think of discipleship as a program instead of a process? Many programs have been developed to “grow” disciples. But because every person is different and has different struggles and temptations, discipleship cannot be so easily packaged.

At its core, discipling is essentially whatever we do to intentionally help other Christians to grow up in holiness. It’s a process of becoming like Christ; it’s not a program. It may mean reading a good Christian book and discussing it; it may mean outlining a book of the Bible together; it may mean going through a Core Seminar class and discussing it over lunch; it may mean sharing insights from the weekly sermon over coffee; it may mean bringing your kids over to play at another mother’s home and discussing last week’s Sunday night devotional; it may mean inviting a unmarried man or woman over for dinner and talking to them about what the Scripture teaches about marriage and parenting…we could go on and on. What discipling looks like in practice is pretty wide open. The key is that whatever you do should be rooted in the truth of Scripture and presented on the basis of an intentional, loving relationship. In a nutshell, that is what discipling is.

**CONCLUSION**

As we move forward in this class we will consider a lot of the specifics of what discipling looks like in practice, i.e. how to discuss a book with someone else, how to study the bible together, and many other specific topics. But as we walk away this morning I want to remind you that:

* Discipling is *intentional* and *deliberate* – it doesn’t just happen. It requires you deciding, with God’s help, to work to be a conduit for pouring spiritual blessing into the life of another person – as one aspect of your personal obedience to Christ’s command to go and make disciples.
* Discipling is *relational* – it requires you reaching out to get to know other people and invest time in them for their spiritual good. It can’t really be done by video link or internet courses…it requires you (as a part of the local church) to invest real time in real people.
* Discipling is *loving* – there is no greater way that you can show love to fellow believer in Christ than by deliberately, thoughtfully considering how you can do them good spiritually through your relationship with them.
* Discipling involves *training in God’s Word—*we want the Word to reform and change people, and not our opinions and personal ideas.

I encourage you to begin thinking now how you can grow in your own discipleship of Christ by becoming an intentional, deliberate contributor to the culture of discipling at Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]