

**Core Seminar**

**Discipling**

**Class 3: Overcoming Barriers & Excuses**

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**Basic idea**:

We’ve thought about what discipling generally looks like, and have seen that Jesus calls all of us to disciple others. And we have looked at why disciple at all, concluding that it is immensely important for our joy and for God’s glory.

Now, this week we’ll look at some barriers or excuses for not discipling. And then we’ll respond to those barriers and excuses with the Bible, with the goal of answering the question of ‘How can we overcome these barriers and excuses?’

And the assumption in asking this question is that all of us in this room have barriers and excuses that might keep us from discipling. As much as we may *intellectually ascent* to the importance of discipling, I would speculate that for many of us there are reasons why discipling is still difficult for us to put into practice. So, I just want to start with the question to you:

*What are some reasons that a person might give for not engaging in discipling relationships?* What do you think?

I hope that our class today will see that there *might be* some barriers (even previously unconscious ones) that are inhibiting your fruitfulness in intentional spiritually-encouraging relationships. But even if you are not hindered by these issues we will discuss, I bet that someone you spend time with is. Thinking very clearly about barriers and excuses to not engage in discipling will help you be an even better discipler for those you influence.

In this class, we will look specifically at 5 excuses. And to think about these excuses, we can put them into three categories: a problem of theology (excuses 1 and 2), a problem of complacency (excuse 3), and a problem of inadequacy (excuses 4 and 5). Three categories: a problem of theology (excuses 1 and 2), a problem of complacency (excuse 3), and a problem of inadequacy (excuses 4 and 5).

**Excuse #1: I don’t want to be in a position of “authority”.**

Sometimes, people don’t want to be placed in an “authoritative” position. As it is, our culture breeds independence, so the notion of having an authority or being seen as an authority figure is not so appealing. Even less so, then, the desire to teach and instruct others!

How does the world describe authority? How do you think of authority? More importantly, as Christian, we want to know how the Bible pictures authority. Jesus models *authority* for us. Consider how Scripture refers to Jesus’ teaching as “authoritative” (Mark 1:22). In and through Jesus, we see the proper posture of one in “authority,” that of a loving servant. Jesus sets for us the example how an authoritative figure can be a loving servant leader:

John 13:13-14 13You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. 14If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

J. Oswald Sanders in his book “Spiritual Leadership” says the following about what he calls “The Master’s Master Principle:”

*In light of the tremendous stress laid upon the leadership role in both secular and religious worlds, it is surprising to discover that in the King James Version of the Bible, for example, the term “leader” occurs only six times, three times in the singular and three in the plural. That is not say that the theme is not prominent in the Bible, but it is usually referred to in different terms the most prominent being “servant.” It is not “Moses, my leader,” but “Moses, my servant.” The emphasis is consonant with Christ’s teaching on the subject.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Matthew 20:25-28 25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Have this attitude in your heart, the attitude that puts the other person’s welfare ahead of your own. You’ll find even though discipling puts you in a position of authority, an attitude of sacrificial love will wed initiative with service and humility. We are not “lording it over others” when we disciple them; rather, we are serving them, even if they don’t entirely perceive it as such.

We should be very careful to have an appropriate view of our authority in these relationships. Biblical authority is not abusive authority. It’s servant authority. Ask yourself: ‘Am I displaying the servant-hearted love of Christ in my use of authority? Or am I using it for my glory?’ ‘Am I leading them to God’s Word or to me?’

When taking them to God’s Word (and not to our own personal opinions), you are being a loving servant. Don’t get a big head because of your service in this way, but do rejoice in God’s goodness to use you to bear fruit in the lives of others.

**Excuse #2: Intentional discipling relationships turn friends into projects.**

Some people may object that if I engage in a relationship with another Christian that is at it’s heart deliberately focused on encouraging them spiritually, and not merely on enjoying their company or friendship as the primary goal in and of itself, then I have reduced the reality of my true friendship for them and have made them merely into a discipling project.

To help us to understand and deal with this second potential objection, it would help to ask ourselves this simple question…”What is real biblical love and friendship anyway?” ***(take one or two responses from the class)***

In John 15, Jesus says that *real love* is when we love others as Jesus has loved us. If we recognize the example of Jesus love for his disciples as any sort of model, then we cannot conclude that *real love* is merely affirming affection and camaraderie. Jesus loved by setting out fundamentally to do eternal good for others as a supreme mark of his love for them.

Last week we read Jesus words to his disciples from John 15:15 15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. So Jesus’ friendship was shown by revealing his Father’s will. Did you hear that? Jesus’ friendship was shown by revealing the Father’s. “For all that *I have heard* from my Father *I have made known* to you.” Friendship is shown by sharing the Father’s will. They were not merely a project to him, but he loved them by revealing truth.

Note Ephesians 5:1-2 1Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Again here we see Christ’s desire to set out to do good for all his children as a grand mark of his love for them, and a pattern for us to follow. We are to live a life of love for others just as Christ lived a life of love for others. *Real love* sets out purposefully to do spiritual, eternal good for the beloved.

That said, it is possible to make people into projects. We can make a friend a project by demanding rigid adherence to some set “program,” or by not being concerned with the actual feelings of our friend, or by throwing simple bible verses without taking the time to understand why they are struggling.

So, just to throw out a question: How can we avoid making a project of people? What do you think?

At the end of the day, we need to be faithful to God and to Scripture in this. There will be times when we have relationships with people who simply will not “feel” loved by an intentional relationship focused on their spiritual good. Sometimes this happens because they believe your intentional discipleship is out of sense of obligation, not out of any sense of really loving them. Other times this will happen when someone really doesn’t believe that caring for their own soul is the most important thing in their life.

For many a relationship focused mainly on spiritual encouragement may be emotionally unsatisfying. I encourage you to maintain a good balance of gentleness, kindness and clarity on this point. We want to be kind and gentle, to help a person understand and perceive the love we have for them in Christ. At the same time, especially with less mature Christians, you don’t want to see your way of relating to them being driven by their “felt needs;” rather, you want it to be shaped by God’s Word. So be a friend, hang out if you can, but keep in mind that pointing them to the Father, to greater joy in repentance and obedience, that’s the best way to love them.

**Excuses #3: I just don’t feel like it, and don’t have time for it**

We live in a busy town, in a busy country, in a busy age of the world. Most of the lives around us, and many of our own, are full to overflowing with relatively good things. Considering all that we have received from God and his church, what does it say about our understanding of grace and love if we hoard those blessings to ourselves?

Many times it helps to set the focus on things that really matter in life, the things that Bible directs as being most important. Think about how God has cared for you, loved you, forgiven you, blessed you, and comforted you. As you think about God’s love, forgiveness, and care for you, this thought should cause you /motivate you to do the same for others (John 15:15; Eph 4:32; 2 Cor 1:3-5). We love others because God first loved us.

Remember that life is not full without Christ. If our friends are not living life the way that God intended them to live, then they aren’t living life to the fullest. To choose not to encourage them *to live life with Christ* is un-loving. (repeat) Let me remove the negatives from the previous sentence and say it to you another way: To challenge them to live their life with Christ at the center is the most loving thing you can ever do for them.

Think about individuals who have encouraged you through your faith, and who have challenged you to fight off sin. The great commission was meant to have a spreading effect—not to end with you.

What if your problem is time? What if you don’t feel like you’ve got time to disciple others? It might well be that even with an insane schedule you can do this. (Good to talk through with someone else, like a close friend or a pastor, what a sane schedule might look like.)

It is almost certain, that if you look through your schedule you will find that there are things of lesser value that you could dump to make time to be an encouragement to others in this church. More than anything else, I suspect it comes down to a matter of desire and priorities.

I don’t know if you’ve ever considered how *expectations* can cause us to do less in the Christian life. Take, for example, your quiet time. For many, if you can’t do a 30 min to hour-long quiet time with all of the good things you envision (extensive prayer, in-depth study of the passage, mediating on application, etc.), then many don’t do it at all. That’s an incredibly unhelpful expectation. Many of us carry around a similar static expectation for our relationships—we don’t have the time to do *all* the things that might help, so we don’t bother doing *anything* to help. Here’s a quote from my father-in-law: “If something is worth doing it’s worth doing poorly.” Is he advocating poor work or laziness? No he is advocating the importance of the job. Even when not done to our expectations.

Later on in the class, we’ll consider how to do bible study with one another, and how to pray together. But if you don’t have much time to prepare for a discipleship relationship, consider how you can use the local teaching and preaching ministry as a basis for teaching in discipling relationships.

* Attend a Core seminar class with someone and then meet up for lunch to discuss the content.
* Meet together to discuss the Sunday morning sermon.
* Just meeting with someone to stimulate a discussion about content that other people have prepared and delivered is still good and helpful leadership in discipling.

**Excuses #4: I don’t have anything that I can “teach”**

Every Christian has at least one important thing to pass on to others—the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the very least, if you don’t feel like you have anything you can teach, you can seek out someone with whom to share the gospel. You might think of the gospel as what God uses to bring unbelievers to salvation in Christ. That’s certainly true. But the same gospel that saves us is the same gospel that sanctifies us on a daily basis. As we discussed last week, the lines of evangelism and discipling aren’t always clearly drawn!

Throughout the book of Titus, Paul argues that one of the best things we can do is to remind other believers about the basic truths of the gospel. Read Titus 3:1-8

Titus 3:1-8 1Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. 3For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

We must constantly remind ourselves and others of the basic truth of the Gospel. You can form a good discipling relationship with someone just by spending time going over each of these truths in depth. As Paul says, they are “excellent and profitable for everyone.”

Additionally you can use books which we’ll talk more about in a later lesson. **Show books**

Whatever stage you are at as a Christian, you *always* have something you can teach. Your daily life, your prayer, your words, and everything in your life is a means through which you can disciple others.

**Excuses #5: I’m not gifted to disciple others. Others are simply more gifted than I am. Let them disciple others.**

We need to recognize that we all have different gifts that we can pass on to younger Christians. It’s not simply a matter of theology or expertise in biblical exposition. You can disciple someone by teaching them how to pray diligently and effectively, by simply listening to their struggles, by letting them come along with you as you model for them how to live life, etc. (Example of married men or women incorporating singles into their life; single career men or women incorporating college students or high schoolers into their life; etc.)

Discipling is fundamentally about bring people to God’s truth. You are to be a conduit for that truth. If at this point in your Christian life you don’t feel competent or confident in teaching others the Bible then consider reading a good Christ book with someone. If it is a good book, then it includes wisdom and biblical truth that you can discuss and share with someone when you read it over.

Discipling is not something you do on your own. Fundamentally, apart from their own understanding of the gospel, the most important thing you can do for a Christian friend is help them get involved in local church. You want to get your friend involved in your church (or another bible-believe church) so that he/she can be discipled by other people in your congregation, who have gifts that you don’t have. Remember—it takes a church! Discipling should never be thought of as an individualistic endeavor, but a community affair!

Discussion here for other general “excuses” if time permits: Can you give me some other reasons why you struggle with discipling, or suggest some ways you think you or others might make excuses?

**Overcoming Fears of Discipling**

Even if we get past the “excuses” for not discipling, many of us will still have certain fears about discipling. In fact, it’s probably a good thing to have some measure of a healthy, holy fear about the task before you!

Recognize the commitment. Discipling is not to be taken lightly, and a little bit of fear is a good thing.  
In Matthew 18, remember the time when Jesus welcomed the little children. Many think of this passage as being *just* about kids. While this does certainly involve children (esp the kids standing right in front of Jesus), our Lord was also using children as an analogy for how to spiritually deal with any Christian, adults and children alike. Verse six we read that you don’t want to be causing God’s children (or any believer) to stumble.

In 2 Peter 2:1, we find Peter warning the people to not follow false teachers. Throughout the Bible, we find warnings against false teachers who lead people astray. You don’t want to be one of those—not even in the subtlest sense.

By committing to intentionally spending a decent amount of one-on-one time with an individual, we must recognize that we can have a significant influence on their Christian walk—especially if they see us as someone with some authority, and they see us as someone to use as their model. We do not want to teach or exemplify falsehood. So, we should approach discipling with some holy fear, that we would not lead any of God’s children in the wrong direction!

**Dealing with Fears of Failure/Dealing with a General Fear for Your Discipling Ministry**What are some fears that we might have as we approach a discipling relationship?

* Your friend will ask questions that you can’t answer
* You’ll say something wrong
* You won’t live out a perfect Christian life in front of your friend
* Your too immature to help anyone
* You might fail at this
* You might not be liked by the other person, and you (like most people) hate rejection

In all these things, we need to remember that God helps us overcome fear (cf. Psalm 53 and 56), failures, and weaknesses. Not only that, but he finds ways to work through us despite our shortcomings.

* 1 Corinthians 16:10-11: Paul did not condemn Timothy for his fear. Nor does God condemn us.
* 1 Corinthians 1:25-29: God works through the foolish, lowly, despised, and weak things of the world. In that description, we find that we are included. Remarkably, God at work through us—weak, struggling Christians; and he uses these broken vessels to bring truth to others. Praise God that a good ministry of discipleship is not predicated our giftedness, wisdom, or strength!
* 2 Timothy 1:7: God gives us the strength where we need it. He gave us a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.
* 1 Tim. 4:12: Remember what God has given you. Don’t let a low view of your abilities discourage you from attempting to be encouraging to other believers, but rather, hold fast to the righteousness to which God has called you. Paul encourages Timothy to set an example in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

Also, remember that we are not perfect. When we stumble, we need to face our mistakes. We need to show those who we disciple how we deal with sin and failures. Model confession, repentance, and prayer of thanks for forgiveness. If you sin against your friend, ask him/her for forgiveness. If you say something wrong, correct it next time. The world does not like to admit sin and weakness. We can model the Christian life by dealing with it in a straight-forward and honest manner.

**Concluding Thoughts**Despite the fears involved, discipling is a very rewarding process—not only for the disciple, but also for the discipler. It’s also a crucial part of the expansion of God’s kingdom. Out of His own grace and love, God chose *us* to do this work! Sometimes we need to take the courage that comes from being an instrument of God, and just simply need to plunge in.

God will give us strength to do the work He called us to do. We should thank God for all that He has given us in Christ, and look forward to the work that He’s called us to—to pass all that we have been given on to other Christians.

And after all that I’ve said this morning, if you are still scared to partake in a ministry of discipling, remember that ultimately, God doesn’t rely on us, but on his Word. The real power of discipling is in the power of God’s Word and its application in the lives of others.

THINGS TO DO THIS WEEK/3 PRACTICAL STEPS:

* Write out your own barriers and excuses for discipling. Consider the unbiblical reasons that cause you to avoid discipling. Take that list and do what we did today in this class—see if the reasons are reasonable in light of Scripture. You will probably find that most of your excuses can be thrown right out the window once the light of Scripture reflects on them.
* Think about your schedule, and think about how to make an insane schedule more sane so that you have time to start pouring into others. Look particularly for things that you can dump that are of lesser value. (Example: reading newspaper versus having a breakfast meeting with a friend every week.)
* Take some of the teaching from this core seminar or from the morning sermon, and begin to talk about it with a friend this week. Even if it is a very short conversation about truth that’s a step in the right direction. Start proving this week that you will no longer hoard the truth.

Galatians 5:13-14 13For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (ESV)

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS.]

1. Paul S. Rees as quoted by J. Oswald Sanders in *Spiritual Leadership*, (Chicago: Moody Press, © 1967, 1980 The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago), p29. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)