

Growing as a Disciple

Matthew 28:18-20

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

Well, good morning. It is good to open God's Word with you here on this first Sunday of 2024. Last year, around this same time we introduced to you to what we called our "FOCUS Priorities". And what we said was that we were going to at least make an attempt to ensure everything we choose to do in the future as a church specifically it relates to mission and vision – when we think about programs and ministries and events, we want them to fit ONE of our three focus priorities and we gave them to you in a statement that went like this:

Champion Forest advances the kingdom (talk through...in two weeks we are starting a new series called The Kingdom Project – never been more excited about a preaching series in my life. More on that later. We're going to advance the Kingdom of God – how? Here are the FOCUS priorities) **by making disciples, loving our community, and strengthening the Church.**

This is what we are going to be about – prayerfully NOW and ALWAYS. This week, I want in our time together to talk about the first FOCUS priority, and that is "making disciples".

I'm calling the message today: **Growing as a Disciple**

Now, if you are new to church, first of all, we want to say welcome to you. We are so glad that you are here, and I hope that you will continue to come. Even if you are not familiar with the Bible or clear on what the church thing is all about, just give us 3-4 weeks in a row and I can almost promise you, you are going to want to stick around, if not for the teaching and worship for the new friends you will meet.

And so, whether you are new to the area and looking for community OR maybe it's that it's the first of the year and you've made some resolutions to either get back in church or start coming in the first place, we're grateful and I want you to know that we are here to serve you and help you grow and move forward in your faith.

Now, when I say the word "disciple", and talk today about growing as a disciple – don't let that word, mess you up or throw you off track!

It's not a word that we often use in our vernacular or our culture today, but in the life and times of Jesus, it was AND it is a word that is used often in the Bible in reference to those that follow a certain teacher.

In fact, the word "disciple" means "follower, student, learner". There were actually two forms of discipleship back in the day.

You had the Greek model which was very much geared to the mind...it was more about sitting under someone and being educated or enlightened by them. This was the chosen method of people like Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato – it took the form of lecturing and asking and answering questions as way of learning (Socratic method of learning).

And then you had the Hebrew model which also had to do with education and training. But instead of just the kind of “you sit still while someone who knows more than you instills information”, the Hebrew form of discipleship was more life on life. It was about apprenticeship...on the job training. Jesus learned carpentry from watching and learning it from Joseph, his earthly father.

Illus. CF Residency Program – I liken this way of discipleship to our residency program. Each resident has a supervising minister that is supposed to be watching over them...training them...instructing them in their specific area of ministry. It’s life on life, and you really learn a lot this way!

And so, a disciple is a learner...a follower...a student of someone. The Pharisees...the religious leaders of the day were described as men who were disciples of Moses – and they had other religious leaders that they learned from and followed. Those that followed John the Baptist were referred to as his “disciples”.

We see this word over and over again and we certainly see it in regards to those who followed Jesus. He had his twelve disciples, and this brings me to the text that we’re looking at today- Matt. 28.

Now, before we read this passage of scripture, while we’re talking definition and terms here, let me give some clarity to some words that we often use that may seem similar, but are different. You’ll see these terms as you read your Bible.

First, is the word “apostle”. The word apostle means “sent one”. Jesus is referred to in Heb. 3 as “the apostle”. He was sent from God, the Father to the world. Jesus called twelve men to come and learn from him. We call these men “disciples” and they are, but they are also known as apostles.

Jesus said to them in **John 20:21b** – “...As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

We read in the New Testament of other apostles coming after the ascension of Jesus – we’re about to start our Bible Reading Plan.

Illus. Acts Bible Reading Plan – SHOW PROMO – text “Devo” to 77069 to be a part of this. If you’ve done this with us before, you don’t have to text, you are automatically enrolled. You’re going to get an email each day (also on our app) – we’re going to read through Acts together – join us! Great way to start the habit of getting into God’s Word. Our staff and some of our members have written devotionals to go along with them! Be a part! (Kids too!)

As you read Acts, you are going to see this term “apostle” come up. The apostles for the most part were eye-witnesses to Jesus, had a very specific calling on their life as it relates to being sent to a specific place or people AND apostles had a unique and special authority as leaders and founders of the early church.

It's important to note that there are no apostles alive today. Some use the word or title "apostle" to describe an entrepreneurial gift within the church, but there are no apostles in the sense of carrying the weight and authority of those that were eyewitnesses and hand-picked by Jesus as the early church was being founded and established.

So, when it comes to the twelve disciples that we read about in scripture – Peter, James, John – the others. ALL of those disciples were apostles as well.

But the others that followed Jesus's ways and teachings...while they were learners, students, followers of Jesus – they were disciples, it doesn't mean they are apostles.

So, you have apostles. You have disciples. And let me give you one more term – you have "Christians." The word "disciple" and the word "Christian" SHOULD be...and that's the operative term – SHOULD be synonymous, but sadly in our day, there are many that take the name Christian that are not truly following the ways and teaching of Jesus.

They are not his students...NOT his learners...They are fans, but not true followers. And again, tragically...sadly, it should not be this way. We get our word "Christian" from a passage in Acts.

Acts 11:26c – "...And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."

People were looking at the followers of Jesus...followers of what was called "The Way", and:

- they saw how they treated the poor and the outcast...
- they saw how they endured persecution and said "no" to temptation...
- they saw how they looked after one another and shared their belongings and loved each other sacrificially...

They looked at these people following the ways and teachings of Jesus and they looked like "little Christs" – that's where the word "Christian" came from.

And so, it SHOULD be that the word "Christian" and the word "disciple" are synonymous. We should be using them interchangeably! Any person that says they are a Christian – they are a "little Christ"...well, they should be acting and living like a disciple – someone who is a student...a learner...a follower of Jesus.

? – Question for you and we'll read out text. Are you a Christian? If so, this means you should be living as a disciple. And disciples in the text we are looking at today are given a charge – and listen to this: This charge is NOT an optional – it's commanded!

If you are a Christian...a disciple...the ONLY response to what we read today is one of obedience. Let's look at Matthew 28:18-20.

This is known as The Great Commission and notice as we read, this message was proclaimed first to the apostles – and if they had not obeyed NONE of us would be here today claiming Jesus as our Teacher...our Lord.

They did what Jesus commanded and now we share in this same calling...this same command. Jesus – has been vindicated! He has been raised from the dead. He is Lord and is at this point initiating his new Kingdom.

Matt. 28:18-20 – “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.”

The central command here is to make disciples! And as disciples are made, they are to be baptized (that is the mark...their identification as followers of Jesus – as true disciples – they identify with this death and resurrection) – if you have NEVER been baptized and you are a Christian, you need to do it! This shows the world our birth into the new Kingdom that Jesus has begun.

We baptize the disciples we make AND we (v. 20) teach them to observe all that Jesus has commanded.

THIS is how someone grows as a disciple! They are taught to observe and therefore carry out what Jesus has commanded. And where do we learn what Jesus has commanded?

Answer: The Word of God.

THIS right here...the Bible – taking it in...learning it...observing it...walking it out is the way we grow as disciples! Your maturity as a follower of Jesus...how far you go and how much you grow as a disciple is TOTALLY dependent upon how much you KNOW and OBSERVE from this book.

Listen: the word “observe” here is a verb! It doesn’t just mean to see it or watch it or intellectually know it. It means to “keep it”...to do it!

I think the New International Version gets the word right as they translate it “obey”. Making disciples means we are teaching people to know what Jesus said and to do what Jesus said, and we will only what he said and therefore what to do when we give ourselves to his word.

Now, I don’t have time to do an entire message on the Word of God – why you can trust it...it’s authority...it’s sufficiency.

If you would like that sermon, send me an email at pastor@championforest.org – I’ve got a great team that runs that email and we will send you a link and manuscript to a message I have preached on that subject previously here.

What I want to do in the rest of our time together today is get VERY practical with you in how to read your Bible. I don't know of a better topic on this first Sunday in the New Year to talk about than this subject.

If it's true that the only way we will grow as a disciples is by giving our lives to God's Word – KNOWING it and DOING it – than where I want to help is to give you something to “take home” with you that will hopefully inspire you and help you to grow.

Illus. National Championship – Tomorrow night here in Houston. We've got Michigan and Washington. Sorry, Texas! We've got two undefeated teams...and I can tell you who is going to win. You want to know? It's whoever does the basics better! Who blocks and tackles (runs and catches) – the one who does the fundamentals the best is typically the one who wins the game. Simple, but it's true...and ANY coach will tell you that.

Well, if you want to grow as a disciple...it's pretty simple! It starts with making sure you are doing the basics...the fundamentals. And the basics of a disciple is to spend time with the one you are learning from!

See, this is the thing about Jesus and his discipleship. He didn't just use the Greek model and lecture and teach...AND he didn't just do life on life and show them – he combined these models of discipleship and by doing so, he changed the world.

And Jesus is doing the same thing today. If you are a Christian – Jesus lives in you. And as a disciple, if you will get up every day and spend time with him IN his word, he will lecture and teach as you read his word, but by his Holy Spirit he will also come alongside you and show and empower you to DO his word.

Bill Eliff – “When you see a great Christian who always seems to be experiencing God in ways you are not, be assured they have paid a price to see God's glory. Not just for one day, but through years of accumulated consecration, their hearts have been tuned and their eyes opened to encounter Him. They have not done this perfectly, but continually over time.”

Jesus WANTS you to grow as a disciple...he wants to transform your life, but it won't happen if you are not spending time with him observing what he has commanded via his word, the Bible. Remember our definition of a disciple. It is a learner...a student...a follower. To live this definition means we are to spend time with him IN his word and I want to show you very practically in the rest of this message how you can do just that!

I'm going to do this using the acrostic: **OBSERVE**

O – Open your Bible

Okay, again very practical here. If we want to grow as a disciple, it won't happen apart from time with God in his word. What I would encourage you to do is to start by getting you a good study Bible.

I use the ESV Study Bible, but really ANY study bible will do. Just get one that gives you notes to help you understand and cross references that will help you more fully understand what you are reading.

Psalm 119:130 – “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.”

Heb. 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

There is NOTHING like this book. I like to say, when you read it, it reads you! It’s the living, eternal word of God. If we want to grow as a disciple, we have to open it up.

So, start tomorrow! Wake up 15 minutes than you would normally wake up. Sign up for our reading plan if you don’t know where to start and just give the Lord 15 minutes.

B – Begin in prayer

You wake up...your grab that cup of coffee and you get to a set place at a set time. Make an appointment with Jesus and keep it!

Illus. Two Chairs

Begin in prayer. Begin with a prayer of surrender. Ask the Lord to speak to you in your time alone. Tell the Lord in prayer, “Here I am, Lord. Speak to me. Cleanse me of any sin. Show me the way you want me to go. Teach me about yourself today.”

S – Sit in silence

Sit there and let your mind empty itself – this will take longer for some than for others! Ha! Really when I say sit in silence, what I am telling you is to limit distraction.

- Put the phone in the other room...
- Don’t have your computer open...
- Don’t have the radio on...

God wants to speak, but he speaks to those who are still and silent long enough to listen. Show the Lord you mean business by giving him the first of your day and by being sober and serious in it.

illus. Conviction of phone – I’m in the presence of God!

E – Engage the Scripture

Here's what I mean by this. We have in God's Word the greatest treasure we could ever ask for! Just listen to the Psalmist speak regarding the word of the Lord!

**Psalm 19:7-11 – “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9 the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”**

And then from Solomon, the wisest person to ever live...speaking to his son!

Prov. 2:1-6 – “My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; 3 yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, 4 if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

Wisdom. Knowledge. Insight. Understanding. A Fear of the Lord – it all comes from wrestling with...taking in...holding to God's Word. This is what I mean when I say “engage it”.

Let me give you a track to run on that will help you engage with God's Word. Ask yourself questions:

- **Is there a promise to claim?**
- **Is there a sin to avoid?**
- **Is there a command to obey?**
- **Is there a blessing to enjoy?**
- **Is there an example to follow?**
- **Is there a teaching to learn?**

When you engage with the text, you are asking yourself questions and at the same time asking the Holy Spirit to speak with you. Here are two huge questions you can ask yourself as you engage the scripture.

- 1. What does this text teach me about God?**
- 2. What does this text teach me about me?**

R – Reflect and Record

Write what you are reading down. Don't just open your Bible, open a notebook and/or a journal with it! Get your pen in hand.

Illus. Champion Forest journal/Merch

I can't encourage this enough. Write the date down. Write the passage you are reading down. Write out your prayer. Write out the questions you are asking.

This does two things: First, it helps you stay focused. You're recording your prayers and reflecting on what you are reading. It helps you stay focused AND it helps you to remember!

Illus. Personal testimony - I can't tell you how great it is to go back in my journals and see what I was reading a year ago! I see where I have grown and where I still have work to do.

And let me say this, write in your Bible. If there is something going on in someone's life that you know or love – a surgery or a death – write that down by the passage you are reading along with the date. As you read that passage again through the years, you'll see that date and the name of that friend or loved one and it will remind you to pray for them or shoot them a text!

Bring that notebook with you to church and take notes! I've told of my vision before...to see Champion Forest coming in and people carrying their Bible and notebook!

It's a Chinese Proverb: **“The faintest ink is more powerful than the strongest memory.”**

And this is just a tip – don't get all concerned with if your handwriting is bad or overthink your journal thinking people will be reading it 100 years from now! I write where no one can read it and have strict instructions upon death to burn my journals! I don't want anyone knowing what I was thinking or praying at times!

V - Verse by verse

What I mean by this is read the Bible systematically. Have a plan. If you don't you'll get frustrated pretty quickly. Most Study Bibles have a reading plan in them...you can find all sorts online.

illus. My Personal Reading Plan

If you are new to this, don't bite off more than you can chew! Start with our Acts plan we are doing and when one verse comes off the page, stop there and pick up the next day. It's not about how much you take in, it's about how much to understand and implement into your life. And this leads to the last step:

E – Exercise your faith

What you read, put into practice! Again, this is what the word “observe” means. We DO what we read. Last year, we studied the book of James. Remember his admonition?

James 1:22 – “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

Listen, it's the first of the year and I know we have a lot of New Year's Resolutions to eat better and get in shape. We know that the way to physical health and physical growth is via physical exercise!

Well, the same is true spiritually. If we want to grow as a disciple, we have to ACT on what we read...we have to work it out!

? – Are you a Christian? If so, you should be a disciple as well. And if you are a disciple, let me ask you a question – Are you growing as a disciple?

We want to help you as a church. It's why we have Life Groups (explain). It's why we have a ministry called Next Step (explain). If you are interested all you have to do is text those key terms (**Groups** and **Disciple**) to **77069**:

If you want to grow as a disciple, let's start now and let's do it together. I promise you, it'll be a decision you never regret. Jesus will transform your life as you follow him.

Let's pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.