

# the importance of relationship.

Can we learn Jesus by ourselves? Can we learn Him apart from relationships that embody His teachings as well as His grace? Can we learn Jesus apart from living it out within community, from life together as He intended? Furthermore, in order to “make” a disciple, wouldn't we have to live out these family-like relationships as light in darkness together among both those who have already believed Jesus as well as those who are yet to believe?

What is the goal of this thing we have called “discipleship” anyway? Is it just for me to know more about God? To better myself? To become a good person?

Let me pose another question before we dive into the suggested shifts from informational discipleship to relational disciple making the way Jesus did it?

Think about this: *Is the goal of discipleship to make good individuals?*

Let me ask it a different way. If the goal of discipleship is good individuals, then why did Jesus pray what He prayed in John 17? Check it out:

“I’m praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in Me because of them and their witness about Me. *The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind*— just as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, so they might be one heart and mind with Us. Then the world might believe that You, in fact, sent Me. The same glory You gave me, I gave them, so they’ll be as unified and together as We are—I in them and You in Me. Then they’ll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that You’ve sent Me and loved them in the same way You’ve loved Me.” (John 17:20-23, *The Message*).

According to this passage, is the goal to become good individuals or unified individuals who embody the loving oneness of His goodness?

You might rebut this by saying that no one is doing discipleship in an effort to make good individuals. Are you sure, though? I ask because I sense that the very ways we have measured behaviors and defined holiness suggest that we do, in fact, think discipleship can make us “good people” and is intended to make a bunch of good individuals. And this is a very, very serious issue.

Most discipleship models seem to be based on the thought that individuals need to isolate themselves from bad things, study what the Bible says, and then live its teachings the best that we can. May I be so bold as to suggest that we will never make disciples of Jesus if individual goodness is the goal. We will never become the answer to His prayer in John 17 if individual goodness is the goal. And based on the language of His prayer (as well as the language of John 6:29), we will never see the work of God come alive among us if individual goodness is the goal. Take a look at these two passages next to each other:

“May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us, so that the world may believe You sent Me” (John 17:21, CSB).

“Jesus replied, “This is the work of God—that you believe in the One He has sent.”” (John 6:29, CSB).

Did you catch that? Disciples of Jesus *together* in relationship making disciples with Jesus is so central to God’s redemptive mission and righteous purposes that He links those who have yet to believe and those coming to believe “in the One He has sent” with the phrase “may they all be one.” How important are relationships? How important is it to envision our spiritual development within community rather than within a mirror? So important that Jesus prayed for it the night before He died, *and so important* that it is at the heart of His new command: “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35 CSB).

The world will know Whom we follow and come to believe in the One who was sent not by our individual goodness but by a group of disciples who embody His good love together.

If our individual goodness is the goal, then *I* will be the focus, not *Him*. If individual goodness is the goal of discipleship, then we will give more attention to the development of our own personal goodness rather than be attentive to the opportunities to share in relationships the News of His goodness that He delivered personally. Or we will expend our energy trying to deal with our own personal failures rather than highlighting the Love that nailed all of our failures to a cross.

We must surrender moralism and embrace His grace and His mission and His resurrection life. This is not about my becoming good so that I can make disciples. This is about His being so good to invite me along to make disciples with Him, and thus experience abundant, loving, and good life. It's not my goodness on display—it's *His goodness* on display!!!

Am I so busy trying to make myself into a masterpiece that I am forsaking His intent to make us together into His masterpiece?

I fear we have missed what Paul communicated to the church at Ephesus:

“He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, *so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do” (Eph. 2:6-10, CSB).

The “you” in this passage is in the second person plural. I *am not* saying that the salvation that Jesus freely gives us is impersonal. It is very personal, and it is very much offered graciously and responded to gratefully as individuals. I *am* saying, though, that Jesus and Paul both linked the evidence of the Gospel to our embodiment of His goodness together. In the coming ages, Jesus will hold up the bride of Christ, His beloved, whom He has unified through His goodness and love, as the display of the immeasurable riches of His grace. And in the “now,” Jesus prayed that we would be one so that people believe in the One sent to unite His beloved into one pure bride. If

you're not convinced this is what Paul meant, just read the rest of Ephesians chapters 2 and 3.

What if the goal of “discipleship” is not good individuals but rather relationships that give evidence to the loving goodness of God? Nothing will capture the attention of the world around us better than a bunch of selfish people living selfless, gracious, forgiving, reconciled lives together— “...by this everyone will know...” (John 13:35).

So, how then should we think of “personal holiness”? We are to be holy as He is holy—yes—but we cannot make ourselves holy through “discipleship” without relationship, through some combination of *perfected religious practices*. Paul wrote the letter of Colossians just to address this issue. Consider these portions of that letter:

“*He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves*” (Col. 1:13, CSB).

“We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. I labor for this, striving *with His strength that works powerfully in me*” (Col. 1:28-29, CSB).

“Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of what was to come; *the substance is Christ*. Let no one condemn you by delighting in *ascetic practices*... If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to *regulations*. ‘Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch’? All these *regulations* refer to what is destined to perish by being used

up; they are human commands and doctrines. Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting *self-made religion*, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence” (Col. 2:16-23, CSB).

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and *your life is hidden with Christ in God*. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore, *put to death* what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, God’s wrath is coming upon the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. But now, put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator. In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, *put on* compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. *Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity*” (Col. 3:1-14, CSB).

Do you see it? Believers in the Gospel of Jesus (Col. 1:13) demonstrate maturity and personal holiness—not through perfected reli-

gious practices but rather through perfect love alive in practical ways within relationships with other people.

You might question, “Then what does all of that stuff about putting to death those immoral things mean?” Think about this: all of those things are only present in self-absorbed, unloving relationships. Jesus said all the law and the prophets hang on two commands: to love God and to love our neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40). Paul was asserting that maturing Jesus followers live less lustful and more loving lives. Personal holiness is not only about individual goodness. It’s about relational love, too—unconditional and undeserved and unending love.

We must surrender the presupposition that we can manufacture individual goodness. If we follow Jesus but still live from a presupposition that we can “discipleship” our way to a more improved self, then we may be following moralism rather than Messiah. That would mean we are not a follower of Jesus as much as we are a follower of our own personal development and religious ambitions.

But what about *me*? What about *my needs*? If all we do is this making disciples stuff and care about loving other people in relationship, when will I be cared for?

Great questions! I get asked about the issue they address often, but I am usually burdened by the way people respond to the answer I offer. I would suggest that we as individuals are cared for by the very people to whom we give care. Obviously there’s the role of a pastor, but *I* will grow as *I* am going with Jesus and with other believers to invite along those yet to believe. I will mature as a disciple *while* I am making disciples, rather than thinking I will make disciples once I mature.

The church is not some place intended to serve *my needs*; the church is people following Jesus together who serve *others* like we are

all family. Jesus even called His family those who lived on mission with Him (Matt. 12:46-50). We should think like Jesus did—that we are cared for and give care to those with whom we live on mission as though we are all family. This is our mission. It is what Jesus did and what He has invited us along to do with Him: “In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world” (John 17:18).

What if Jesus’ intent for us was simply that we live on mission with Him as His family while inviting along into His family those who are yet to believe? All the while, we love as He loved us; we come near as He came near to us.

But how will others know we are His disciples (John 13:34-35) if all we do is think in terms of “my needs” and “my growth” (the way discipleship has too commonly encouraged us to do)? How will they know if we don’t go near (Rom. 10:9-15)?

This is a critical issue with our current forms of “discipleship.” It separates us from the world around into learning environments with other Christians that tend to become self-absorbed groups rather than Jesus-compelled family. It is irrational in its purpose because we declare that this form of “discipleship” will move us to be more like Jesus, even shape us to be on mission as He intended. But how will this ever happen when our friendships with those who are not following Jesus—who have not yet believed the love of the God who came near—become secondary (at best) to our Christian relationships?

The bottom line is this: relationships are important for making disciples.

Crucial. Central. The context for being disciples of Jesus who make disciples with Him is having loving relationships with believers and unbelievers alike in which we selflessly give care and grate-



fully receive care. As a result, we prompt people toward believing in the One who was sent.

Ok, now what about the shifts that I want to suggest?

Remember that these are merely suggestions. They are not dogmatic assertions that if not believed will result in eternal damnation; nor are they end-times prophetic announcements that if believed will usher us into the ultimate day of “Good News” on a certain date. They are simply my perspective from asking God for wisdom on what we must think and do to actually equip people for making disciples of Jesus who make disciples *with Him* in daily rhythms and everyday relationships.

My hope is that this will start conversations that will help us all to grow toward the original intention that Jesus had for us to make disciples.