

A Lifestyle of Learning
Series: Six Marks of a Disciple, Introduction
Matthew 4:18-22
May 4, 2008

As some of you know, I have two weeks every year that are set aside as ‘Study Leave.’ They are times for me to attend a conference, or to read, study, pray, think, and plan. Sometimes when I go on study leave I read a book that so clearly and compellingly captures the mission of the church that I get very excited. Such was the case with this book, *The Disciple Making Church*. The author is Glenn McDonald, a Presbyterian pastor from Indiana. I thought the book was so helpful in thinking about our primary mission that I brought it to the session, which has been reading and discussing the book since last fall during our study times. The Board of Deacons is also reading and discussing the book. I also gave copies to the staff. So your elected and ordained leadership as well as the staff are all reading, thinking about, and discussing this book. One of our LIFE Groups is also studying it. It focuses, as you might have guessed, on the primary mission of the church, according to Jesus.

We heard some of Jesus' very first words to those who would become His followers: “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And among His very last words to His followers were these: “Go and make disciples...” Jesus called ordinary people to a new way of life – following Him. Jesus commanded His disciples to make more disciples. Notice Jesus didn't say, “Go and make *believers*.” He didn't say, “Go and make *church members*.” Disciples were to make disciples.

Now, we use the words ‘disciple’ and ‘discipleship’ pretty freely in the church. But I wonder if we really know what they mean. At its most basic, the word ‘disciple’ simply means ‘learner.’ Student. A disciple is one who learns from a master-teacher. Like an apprentice. Not just book learning, not just facts, figures, data. But hands-on, real life experience gained by working alongside the Master. The Greek word used in the Bible that translates ‘disciple’ always implies a *relationship* between the Master and the disciple. The word as it's used in the New Testament always assumes the existence – listen – of a *personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the disciple*. A **disciple** of Jesus Christ, then, is one who lives *with* Jesus in order to learn to live *like* Jesus. That's what the gospels tell us about the lives of those first disciples. Their personal attachment to Jesus shaped their whole lives. Does *your* personal attachment to Jesus shape *your* whole life?

Here's the working definition I'd like to use as we think about discipleship and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus: **Discipleship is a lifestyle of learning from Jesus by living with Him 24/7.**

A **disciple** then is a man, woman, or child who is learning to think, act, and be like Jesus in every possible respect, every day of the week. We have many members who are students at the Academy of Lifelong Learning at the UD. Well, I want to suggest that the Church is the Academy of Lifelong Learning for disciples, followers of Jesus. Or at least, we're *supposed* to be. I believe that this church and *every* church is supposed to be a disciple-making church. A place where people are learning a lifestyle of learning from Jesus. We have said that we believe

that balancing the five biblical purposes of the church, as Jesus describes them in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission – Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Mission – we have said that balancing these purposes will make us the kind of church God wants us to be. Balancing these five purposes in our lives as individuals will make us the kind of *people* God wants us to be.

See, here's the problem: it's easy in the church to be focused not on these purposes, but on more measurable, concrete things. Buildings, bucks, and bodies. We like stuff we can *count*. Stuff we can *touch*. We sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that if we have a nice building, enough money, and a growing, or at least not shrinking, number of bodies attending our services and programs, that we are doing okay. That we are fulfilling the purpose for which we exist. But this is wrong. Jesus did not tell His followers to build church buildings, collect, save, and invest money for the future, or base their 'success' on how many people came to the meetings. He told them to make disciples. "Come, *follow* me," Jesus said, "And I will make you fishers of men." Jesus called people to follow Him, to learn from Him, so they could be like Him. That is still our commission today: to call people to follow Jesus, to learn from Him, so they can be like Him.

In the Forward to the book, Pastor and teacher Stan Ott writes, "Discipleship is a lifestyle to be lived before it is a program to be run... a lifestyle centered on an unambiguously expressed set of defining practices." Discipleship is *a lifestyle centered on certain practices*. So, being a disciple of Jesus involves not only knowing but doing. Not only believing but acting. So if you call yourself a 'disciple' of Jesus, a follower of Christ, your life ought to look very different than the lives of those who are *not* disciples, *not* followers. Discipleship is not one program among other programs of a church. *Faith in Action* was a program. We didn't do it just to say we'd done a nifty program. We did it hoping that the **PRACTICE** of serving others would emerge in all our lives as a way of life, a lifestyle. *Just Walk Across the Room* was a program we did back in January about building relationships and sharing our faith. We didn't do it just to say we'd done a program on personal evangelism. "Run an evangelism program. Check." We did it hoping that the **PRACTICE** of building relationships with people far from God so that we could one day share our faith with them would develop and grow as a way of life for us. We don't have *LIFE Groups* just because it's a good idea to have a small group program. We encourage you all to join a LIFE Group so that the **PRACTICE** of living in Christian community becomes a lifestyle for all of us. You get the point. Discipleship is not a **program** we do at church. It is a set of **practices** that result in a particular **lifestyle**.

So what *are* these practices? What should the lifestyle of the typical, healthy follower of Jesus look like? That's the question we're going to spend the next six weeks talking about. Glenn McDonald has identified six characteristics that describe a man or a woman who is learning to live like Jesus. He calls them the **Six Marks of a Disciple**. They are:

- A Heart for Christ Alone
- A Mind Transformed by the Word
- Arms of Love
- Knees for Prayer
- A Voice to Speak the Good News
- A Spirit of Servanthood and Stewardship

These six marks are the essential description of what it means to **be like** and to **live like** the Son of God. They describe this lifestyle of learning I've been talking about. See, what you believe is not what you *say* you believe. What you believe is what you *do*. It's how you live. If you *say* you are a follower of Jesus, these are your defining practices. I hope that over these next six weeks, you will take some time as we consider each of these marks to really evaluate yourself and your life of faith. Take a hard and honest look at *your* lifestyle. A lifestyle of learning means you're always growing. You're always learning something new about God, something new about who you are in Christ, something new about how God wants you to live and love and serve. The purpose of evaluation is not condemnation, not perfection, but progress. Practice does *not* make perfect. That's a myth. Practice makes *progress*. You know what I like to say: **I know I'm not where I oughta be, but thank God I'm not where I used to be.**

These practices will help you make progress toward a lifestyle of living like Jesus. That is the goal for every Christ-follower: **a lifestyle of learning from Jesus to be like Him by living with Him.** We learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus from Jesus Himself. The relationship is key. These marks, these characteristics, are not something new to *do*. They are something to *be*.

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." If we continue in Jesus' word, if we obey His teaching. Then we are His disciples. *Move to the Table.*

Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." And so we do. In obedience to Jesus our Master, our Teacher, we do this. We call it the Lord's Supper. Holy Communion. In the New Testament, the word for 'disciple' *always, always, always*, implies a *supremely personal union* between disciple and teacher. And that is what we remember and celebrate at this Table. The *supremely personal union* we can have with God because of what Jesus did on the cross. Without the cross – without Jesus' death – we would not be able to come near to God.

Jesus said, "Come, and I will make you..." "I will make you loving, I will make you faithful, I will make you good." All we have to do is come. Here at this Table, we come – just as we are – to receive the desire and the strength to follow as He calls us, to go where He would go, to live as He lived, to love as He loved.