

Paradise Lost and Restored: What is Discipleship? (Part 3)

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I. Introduction

The #1 responsibility of Christians is to make disciples—people who live like Jesus—out of everyone around us, family, friends, co-workers, etc. But how? And if Jesus is our model, what specifically do we need to copy so that we make disciples the way He did?

II. If Discipleship is Parenting, What does a Spiritual Parent Look like?

The relationship is Parent/Child (or Shepherd/Sheep) not Teacher/Pupil? It seems obvious, but the relationship spiritual parents will have with their spiritual children is that of parent/child (or shepherd/sheep), not teacher/student. In the Gospels, the relationship Jesus had with His disciples was a common one: Rabbi/Disciple. And the goal of the disciple was not just to learn from the Rabbi, it was to become the Rabbi, i.e., to live life exactly like the Rabbi. This is akin to a parent/child relationship and that's exactly how Jesus saw His relationship with His disciples. He saw them as His spiritual children, John 13:33 (His little flock, Luke 12:32).

But it's interesting that after Acts 21 the word "disciple" disappears. If making disciples is the heart of what every Christian is supposed to do and was the last command Jesus gave His apostles, why don't the apostles talk about discipleship in their letters? They actually do, but they speak of it in different terms. They speak of it as a parent/child, or shepherd/sheep relationship, e.g., Acts 20:28. This is why you see Paul, Peter, and John talk to their audience as a parent to a child (or shepherd to sheep), 1 Corinthians 4:14-17; 1 Peter 1:14; 5:1-11; 1 John 2. It is why Paul considers Timothy and Titus his sons, 1 Timothy 1:2, 18; Titus 1:4. It's why you see the apostles instruct, encourage, discipline, and comfort their audiences as a parent to a child, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, James, 1 John, 1 & 2 Peter. And as we see the interaction between the apostles and their spiritual children, we must notice that discipleship is not about talking and learning, but living and doing. That is, the apostles don't so much as discuss discipleship with their spiritual children, instead, they *live* and *do* discipleship with them. Discipleship is something you do, not just something you learn.

This is why you can't follow Jesus' footsteps in a classroom, becoming a disciple of Christ will not happen by listening to sermons (even a million sermons) or going to seminary. Let's pretend that being Jesus' disciple is an occupation and you asked someone, "What do you do for a living?" and they say, "I'm a disciple of Jesus." What picture would you get in your mind of what they do? Would you picture them in a classroom listening to a preacher or seminary professor teach them about Jesus? Or would you think, "Oh, I see. This guy probably tries to live his life the way Jesus did. And he probably tries to do everything Jesus said, like getting deadly serious about their (Matthew 5:30) and inviting and showing others how to live the way Jesus lived (Matthew 28:19-20)." Why would you get this picture and not one of him in a classroom? Because being a disciple is not about learning but living, living the way Jesus lived and (observing) doing what Jesus said, Matthew 28:19-20. Teaching is involved in discipleship but Jesus coupled His teaching with living what He taught, thus, offering His life as an example to follow.

What are the characteristics of a spiritual parent? As spiritual parents, the model we follow is Jesus. We want our life to look exactly like His; we want to make spiritual children the way He did. Mike and Sally Breen in their book *Family On Mission* note that Jesus' life was three-dimensional.¹ This is what our life should look like if we are to be successful spiritual parents. Jesus' life consisted of an Up, In, and Out dimension:

Up, He had a very strong and close relationship with His Father; He knew that this was key to succeeding in the mission His Father gave Him. How close was Jesus with His Father? His Father often disciplined Him, and what His Father did with Him, Jesus does with us. Jesus spent a lot of time with His father in personal instruction and hands-on training (Isaiah 50:4, cf. Luke 2:41-51; John 5:19-21; 8:28-29), in prayer (Luke 6:12-16; 22:39-46), and in worship (Luke 22:53; John 2:13; 5:1). This is where Jesus got His power and ability to parent His disciples and it's where He got His identity. That is, Jesus' identity was grounded in His Father; His Father's Spirit guided, comforted, and enabled Him, (Matthew 3:13-4:11; Acts 10:38). Jesus taught His disciples just how important this Up relationship was. And as spiritual parents, we cannot give our spiritual children what we don't have.

In, for a family and the members of a family to flourish, the parents and children must have a strong and supportive relationship with each other. Jesus had a strong internal relationship with His family, His disciples. He took them everywhere He went. He taught them and clarified when they didn't understand, Mark 4:33-34. He showed them how to do what He did (pray, teach, preach, heal) and then challenged them to do likewise, Mark 6:7-13. When they got off track, He gave firm or gentle correction depending on what was needed, John 11:17-36. He gave them comfort and encouragement, Luke 12:16-34. He also showed them that the role of a spiritual parent is not about demanding service or flaunting your authority, but serving and giving up your life for those you lead, Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 22:24-27.

Out, Jesus was not here to create a family that would just focus in; His family needed to focus out if it was going to invite others into God's family and see them flourish. Thus, Jesus had a powerful and transformative relationship with the world around Him. His goal was to see the entire world saved. So everywhere He went, He brought the Goodnews of God's Kingdom to the lost. He offered the Father's forgiveness and salvation through His teaching, preaching, healing, and conduct, Mark 1-2. And as He did this, He was focused on two things: fulfilling His father's will on earth as it is in heaven and destroying the works of the Devil, Luke 11:2; John 6:38; 8:28-29; 1 John 3:8.

Your goal is to see your children start their own spiritual families, after Jesus finished parenting His disciples, He gave them strict instructions to do for the world what He had just done for them. They were to go out and make spiritual families out of all the nations, Mathew 28:19:20; Acts 1:8. And that's exactly what they do, Acts–Revelation.

III. Conclusion

I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

¹ *Family on Mission*, Mike and Sally Breen, 3DM Publishing, chapters 6-7.