

## **Strengthen Your Core: Discipleship**

Lessons: **Mark 1:16-20; II Peter 1:1a-11**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%201:16-20;%20II%20Peter%201:1a-11>

In this Strengthen Your Core series we've talked directly about the basic objects of Christian faith: God, Jesus our Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible. These have been hard messages for me, because each week I have wanted to give you in 15 minutes the precise and truest word, condensing between 2000 and 5000 years of people's experience and understanding and my own. I thought the last five weeks were hard, until this week. This week we're talking about discipleship – about what it means to follow Jesus. This is where I live – this is the primary question of my life. I could talk with you for days about this; it's so important to me. Some pastors are all about salvation – their primary heartbreak is lost souls. Some pastors are all about scripture – their primary heartburst is interpreting God's words. For me, it's all about living a life that expresses God's blessings. For me, the Christian story is about discipleship: how should we live? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

It occurred to me this week that children are natural disciples. I'm not claiming great insight here: Jesus even says in Matthew chapter 18 "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." It's because children naturally follow and learn from following.

If you have kids, you've probably noticed this. Your kids watch you. And they learn by copying you. They make the faces you do. They make the sounds you do. They say the words you do (which is why so many of you cleaned up your language when you had children). And they follow you around, doing what you do. That's how they learn, and they become the people they become in large part by emulating the people they do. Of course other things affect who your children become – their personalities, traumatic events, their hardwiring, the actions they take to overcome the things they learned from you – but you're a big part of it.

Children are natural disciples. Being a disciple simply means following someone closely and doing what s/he does until you become like s/he is if s/he were you.

Children are natural disciples. Remember the movie, *The Karate Kid*? The kid, Daniel, is getting badly beaten up by a bully and is rescued by Mr. Miyagi. Because the kid lacks a father figure, he pretty quickly latches on to Mr. Miyagi. Mr. Miyagi has rescued him, and Daniel wants to be like him. So he does what he does. He listens to him and follows him, and does the crazy apparently stupid exercises Miyagi tells him to do because Miyagi matters to him. Remember the scene with Daniel waxing the car? Miyagi is very specific: wax on, wax off, opposite hands, opposite directions. It's obvious to us that Daniel is learning karate moves while he's waxing the car, but he's also waxing the car and following Miyagi.

Turns out, of course, that in a contest between good and evil, Daniel gets beaten up again, by a greedy cheat and scoundrel, but Daniel overcomes it, and triumphs. And in the process, he's not only learned karate, he's become more like Miyagi. He doesn't become Miyagi, but he becomes more like Miyagi would be if Miyagi were he.

That's what discipleship is: following Jesus and doing what he does until you become like Jesus would be if Jesus were you.

We actually have a model for this in adult life. Can anyone think of what this model might be? Apprenticeship. In most of the construction trades, we still carry on the medieval tradition of

apprenticeship. The idea behind being an apprentice is this: if you want to become a plumber — not just learn to connect pipe, but become a plumber — the best thing to do is to follow a plumber around and do what she does until you become a plumber, or what your master plumber would be like if she were you. So when you're thinking about all this, if it helps to think "apprentice" instead of "disciple" do that: it's the same thing.

Now, imagine that a child never had any contact with the parent. Or imagine the apprentice separate from the plumber. If the parent were always over here, doing parent-y things, but the child were over there, paying very little attention to the parent, doing very little the parent does, over time how much would the child resemble the parent? Some, if the child has the parent's DNA, but probably not that much. The child wouldn't develop the parent's habits of thought or action.

If a child were simply born, or adopted, and then never watched the parent, never did what the parent does, the child wouldn't "look" a whole lot like the parent.

Similarly, if the plumber's apprentice spends all his time and attention away from the plumber, the apprentice be much of a plumber when he's done.

When Jesus called his disciples, he didn't say to them: sit down over there and watch me do this. He didn't say, mail me your money. He didn't say, go home and think about what I've said. He said, follow me. Follow me.

Discipleship is following someone closely, doing what he does, until you become like he is if he were you. So there are four main parts to being a disciple: being called (or rescued, or reborn, or adopted) and then choosing to be a disciple; following closely; doing what the master does; and being transformed in the doing.

Being a disciple of Jesus means choosing, following closely, doing what the master does; and being transformed in the doing.

Here's the problem with Jesus' little children metaphor: children watch the parent and do what the parent does until they get distracted or bored. Infants are fascinated with the parent until the parent stops doing something interesting. They really want interaction with the parent when they're hungry, sleepy, or need changing, but then they're on to their own internal lives.

The problem with many of us and our discipleship is we stay in the little child stage of our discipleship. Many of us think we're choosing to follow Jesus, but we're really choosing to remain spiritual infants. We get rescued or have an unusual experience, and we turn toward God, toward Jesus. When that feeling of rescue, that sense of salvation fades, we get bored and distracted. We stop following Jesus. We stop doing what Jesus does. So we remain like infants. We have very little emotional and spiritual stamina. We experience huge spiritual mood swings. And we maintain the spiritual attention span of a gnat.

As spiritual infants, as people who have been adopted into the family of Christ but don't actively follow Jesus, we don't grow. We don't come to resemble our eternal parent. We don't live into our purpose and potential. And, like infants, we have very little effect on the outside world except when we demand something or soil something.

God never intended for us to remain infants. (I suspect Jesus would have never gotten past his physical infancy if that had been God's intent for us.) We can tell what God intended for us by watching the growth and development of Jesus. With each day, Jesus grew into deeper and more authentic relationship with himself, with others, and with God.

We too were created to be in full relationship with God, and to mature into whole and holy spiritual creatures. As Jesus resembles God, as Jesus shows the face of God, so we are given the opportunity to become people who resemble Jesus. We are given the chance to become people who show the face of Jesus. But we cannot mature spiritually without choosing, following him closely, doing what Jesus does, and allowing ourselves to be transformed in the doing.

Why do we do it? Why should we go ahead and be disciples, not just Christians, but disciples? Because Jesus gave his disciples two main tasks; we call these the great commandments and the great commission. The great commandment is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. The great commission is to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them the Way of Jesus. As his disciples, we are called to love God and neighbor, and to teach others the Way of Jesus. In return, we are promised abundant life – that is, deep and meaningful living in this life now.

Practical theologian and philosopher Dallas Willard calls this kind of life “kingdom living”. It’s that “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” stuff. Kingdom living now. So to be a disciple is to be Jesus’ apprentice in kingdom living – learning from Jesus how to lead one’s own life in the Kingdom of the Heavens as he would lead my life if he were I.”<sup>1</sup>

I don’t know about you, but left to my own nature and habits, I find kingdom living to be hard work. I can like people well enough, but loving them, wanting for them, and ensuring that they have what I have for myself – that’s hard work. Left on my own, I don’t have the stamina. My feelings about people shift: sometimes slow checkout clerks bother me, sometimes they don’t. My attention span is very limited: I’m full of good intentions for helping build peace, justice, and economic parity, but then the phone will ring and I forget about it. Left to my own nature and habits, I am a spiritual infant.

It is only through the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit that I can do what is beyond my natural ability. And it is only by following Jesus closely and living the disciplines he lived, that I can change my nature. Remember how Mr. Miyagi had his apprentice Daniel do crazy apparently stupid exercises “wax on, wax off”? It is by doing the crazy apparently stupid exercises that Jesus did and tells us to do that we are formed into beings who can love God, love our neighbor, and make disciples. That’s the reason we practice the marks of discipleship: to gain the stamina and understanding and skills we need to be like Jesus in this world.

When we pray, we are shaped into listeners, close followers, and children of God.

When we worship, we are shaped into worshipers and lovers of God.

When we read the Bible, we are shaped into family members and lovers of the mystery.

When we serve, we are shaped into do-ers of our faith, and people who see Christ in others.

When we relate deeply to others, we are shaped into honest, loving, trusting friends.

When we give, we are shaped into generous, sacrificing, people who love others as much as we love ourselves.

When we bring Christ into our daily lives, actively inviting the Holy Spirit into all we do, we cannot help but be changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *How Does the Disciple Live?*, at <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=103>

And when we choose the easy yoke — when we choose to be free from the law of sin but to be yoked to Jesus as children, apprentices and disciples — we become like he would be if he were us: healers, lovers, and ministers in the world.

When we follow Jesus, when we allow ourselves to be transformed by doing what he does, then his power, God's tremendous healing power can be worked through us in the world. It is only by intentionally shaping yourself to be like Jesus that you can live out your full Godly purpose. It is only through your close following and courageous action that God's deeds of power and love and can be worked in your family and community. And I tell you my brothers and sisters, I believe that it is only by becoming Christ-shaped conduits for God's power and love that we can co-create the kingdom, and fully experience kingdom living.

In the contest between evil and good, between self-serving action and justice, between fear and compassion, it is those who allow themselves to be shaped by Christ who can shape the world. We have been given everything we need in the power and promise of Jesus Christ. Let us be eager to live out our salvation, and to be transformed. And let Jesus, through us, transform the world.

May it be so.

Amen.