

Becoming a Disciple

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[0 : 00] We are carrying on our vision and values series that we started a couple weeks ago. And our vision statement once again is this, to be a healthy city center church in and for Edinburgh committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ in worship, discipleship, community and mission.

And we've talked about what it means to be a city center church committed to the gospel for Edinburgh in week one. We talked about worship Derek let us in talking through worship last week. And so this week we think about discipleship.

And we're back in the book of Acts again, as we have been the past two weeks. And there are other names out there for discipleship. Spiritual formation is the word that's in our new statement of vision and values, which means that the Holy Spirit works to change our spirit from the inside out.

There are other phrases that people use the Bibles where the sanctification. But the very simple way to talk about discipleship is just to say that discipleship means following Jesus, following Jesus day in and day out.

And the reason that discipleship has got to be in our vision is because of Matthew 28. Matthew 28 is the great commission and the great commission of Jesus gives us our marching orders.

[1 : 27] And it says to the church, this is the mission of the church. Go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of Father, Son and Spirit and teaching them to obey all that Jesus ever commanded.

And that last bit we met, we're committed here to making disciples, but also to teaching the disciples everything that Jesus ever commanded to learning to do all that Jesus commanded.

And that little bit at the end of the great commission is the idea of discipleship. And so Saint C's vision is to make disciples and then for us all together as a family to be disciples, to follow Jesus.

So it's very simple. But Acts 9, when you dig into Acts 9, the conversion of Saul gives you a lot of insight, lessons into what it means to both become a disciple and then also be a disciple.

And you've got to have both. You've got to become a disciple in order to be a disciple and you've got to stand on the ground of becoming in order to be. And so we're going to look at those two things this morning, becoming a disciple and being a disciple from Acts 9.

[2 : 34] So let's do that. First, becoming a disciple. There's all sorts of conditions in this passage for what it looks like to become a disciple. And the first we see Saul in this story, also known as Paul, the great apostle.

And this is his conversion. It's the most famous coming to Christ story probably that's ever been written. And it starts with a really stark contrast because every text almost up till now in the book of Acts has been very positive and been about the fruit of ministry, even when they murdered Stephen, a couple of chapters before this.

Stephen's death, the first martyr meant that the gospel spread everywhere and tons of people came to faith. And so it's been a very positive story about the fruit of ministry so far.

And then you turn to chapter 9 and the text says, yet Saul. And this is the moment of contrast in the book of Acts where things for just a moment seem to go desperately south.

And we've got Saul here who is a Pharisee, who is zealous in his religious fervor, and who is a prosecutor and judge sent by the Pharisees to condemn the church of the Christians, the way, the followers of Jesus.

[4 : 00] And if you look at the very beginning of the passage, it says that he was breathing threats and murder. And the verb there for breathing is actually a verb that's normally used in Greek to refer to animals, animals that are breathing, foaming at the mouth, slobbering over the prey that they're about to consume.

And John Calvin here says that the Bible Luke uses a word for Paul that makes him sound like a rabid wolf, wanting to consume the people who follow Jesus Christ.

He's foaming at the mouth and hatred for Christ's people, for anybody who would follow Jesus and for Jesus himself. In chapter 8 verse 3, it says that Saul went out and began to destroy the church, which is a verb there for pulling apart the foundation from the bottom, actually breaking up a foundation of a building, meaning he wanted to destroy everybody from the ground up, including to defame the name of Jesus.

And that brings us to the first lesson of discipleship, the first condition, the first thing to know about discipleship. Because chapter 9 says, by the end of chapter 9, Saul is proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogue to the point that he gets run out.

And that means that Saul is the most unlikely convert to Jesus Christ that's ever lived. And the first condition, the first lesson of becoming a disciple is that nobody, no matter who, is without the hope of the grace of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 46] You know, actually there's no such thing as a likely or unlikely disciple at all. As Romans 3.23 tells us that every single one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God completely.

And that there's actually an equality between Saul and every single one of us, no matter what we've done or haven't done in our lives. There's an equality of deadness before the Lord.

And that means there's no such thing as being a likely or an unlikely convert. This is what John Stott says. He writes, one thing is certain in Paul's conversion. We do not initially seek God unless God first comes and seeks after us.

The Bible says that in our natural state no one seeks after God and that is categorical. Paul's conversion means that every single one of your family members and every single one of your friends and every single one of your colleagues and every single person that's here today is both too far gone in their sin to bring themselves up on their own and never too far gone to receive the grace of Jesus Christ into salvation at the very same time.

And so that's the first thing about becoming a disciple that we have to see. Now the second thing is this. To actually become a disciple you've got to be encountered by the light.

[7 : 11] And we see that in verse three, in verse three the light comes to Paul, hits Paul actually, we're told and he's knocked over. It says that he physically falls when the light comes to hit him.

Now it's very likely that he's riding on a horse and so he falls off of this horse and if not he falls off of his feet and hits the ground. Now the question is why? Why is it that when this light confronts him he literally physically gets knocked over?

It's because the physical reality is a manifestation of what's going on spiritually in his heart at the moment. He when the light confronts him in his heart he spiritually and physically gets knocked over and that's because of the second condition.

See becoming a disciple means actually being knocked over, being knocked back, having the rug pulled out from underneath you by a truth that you did not expect.

By being encountered by a truth that you could have never made up on your own. By being encountered by God in the way that God reveals himself.

[8 : 23] Now you see, let me explain this because Paul thought that Jesus Christ was the ultimate pretender because what Saul expected was a Messiah that would come into the world and would march straight to Rome and displace Caesar off of his throne and establish Israel as the true power of the land.

And so Saul thinks that he's being zealous that he's actually condemning the heretics, that he's chasing after the pretender and then when Christ comes to him here the Messiah comes to him and says, the light hits him.

He realizes that Jesus is saying, I am the Messiah that is beyond your preferences. I am not the God that you had created according to the things you expected me to be like.

And so being a disciple actually means being encountered by the God that you could have never made up. By the God that you can't, by the real God, by the truth and it has to knock you back.

It has to knock you off of your feet. There's an example of this. Many pastors have pointed this out in the past but when you talk to people in an international community like ours is here, there's people from all over the world in our church and in this city.

[9 : 47] But when you talk to people who are maybe exploring Christianity that come from different parts of the world, oftentimes, oftentimes, not always, but oftentimes people from places like Edinburgh, from Western Europe, from the United States, from Canada are very, very happy to hear a Christianity, to hear about a God in Christianity that says that God, Jesus will accept you no matter what you've done.

They're very happy to hear about a God who would accept anybody no matter their lifestyle, no matter what they've done in the past. But then very often if you talk to somebody from other cultures, maybe more traditional cultures, cultures from the Middle East or other places, they're very happy.

They understand when you say that God is a God of wrath who brings justice upon people who have done wrong things and they're not as okay with the fact that Jesus Christ comes into the world to accept anybody no matter what they've done.

And you see what that means. It means that Romans 1.18 is true, that every single human being that's ever lived views God through the lens of their own culture and their own personal preferences and the way that they want God to be.

And what the condition of discipleship is that we've got to be encountered by the truth as the truth has revealed himself truly in the middle of history by the real Christ.

[11 : 17] And this is so important because it's so important that God is not as we want him to be. It's very important that that's the case because it's very important to face the real God because if God was just a God that you could understand, if God, if you liked everything that you read about when you read about the living God, then God would be nothing but a construct of your own heart.

He wouldn't be beyond your preferences. And so we've got to expect that when we come and see God as he truly revealed himself that there will be things that we can't understand and there will be things that maybe at first we can't even, we struggle with and we don't even like because the true God has got to be the God that's beyond our personal culture and our preferences and greater than our individual hearts.

And so the second condition of discipleship, becoming a disciple, is to be encountered by the light. Anybody can become a disciple because of the power of the grace of Jesus Christ and at the same time we've got to be encountered by the God who is greater than our preferences.

Now the third thing of four is this. That means then we've got to also plunge into darkness. When we're encountered by the light to become a disciple, you've got to plunge into the darkness.

We see that here. Saul hears Jesus say, why are you persecuting me? And Saul realizes in that moment that he is religious, he's religious and at the same time an enemy of God.

[12 : 57] And in response to that, he knows, I'm in the darkness and he realizes that he's been exposed by the light.

And that means that disciples must come poor in spirit as Jesus puts it, that we do not have the resources in ourselves to deal with the great problems that we face.

And in fact, in verse eight, physically, again physically, what's going on physically in Paul is a manifestation of what's going on spiritually.

And in verse eight, Paul actually becomes blind and he cannot eat, he cannot drink, he becomes helpless and he becomes lifeless. Why?

Because being a disciple means admitting and owning our helplessness before we can ever attend to our need. And here is every single one of our needs today.

[13 : 56] We all have three great, great needs. And this is what they are. We need forgiveness from our past today.

And we need freedom from the judgment that we deserve today. And we need the hope of communion with the God we were made to be with.

And we've got to realize that we're in darkness. We've got to plunge in the darkness. We're blind. We can't, we cannot do anything about the great need that we have. And so forth and finally, that means that we've got to turn and grasp a new identity.

Paul it says here, Saul was blind and lifeless in the house of Judas for three days. Did you catch that when we read it? That he was, that he went blind and lifeless into the house of Judas for three days.

Now why? And it's because Saul needed three days as a dead man, buried, lifeless, unable to eat, unable to drink, unable to see in order to know the one that he had been united to.

[15 : 11] You see, in the three days that Saul is buried in lifelessness, he's awakening to the fact that he was already buried in the one that's come to him as the light.

And you know, what's going on in those three days? I think that he's awakening to what he will later write, I have already been crucified with Christ and buried with Christ and therefore raised with Christ.

Therefore it's no longer I who live, but Christ who's living in me now. And you see, the great condition of discipleship is knowing, turning and saying, I am united to Jesus Christ forever.

And that means that we say discipleship is to follow Jesus, but let me up the ante on it. It's not just to follow Jesus, it's to actually know that you are united to Jesus forever.

And what does that mean? It means that whatever is true today of Jesus Christ is true of you now and always. And remember the three great needs that we have.

[16 : 16] We have a great need for forgiveness from our past. And today if you're united to him as a disciple, it means that you've already died to your sins in his cross.

And you've got a great need for freedom from the great and wrathful judgment of God that we deserve. But if you're united to him, then God has already said to you in your burial, which is his burial, that you are not guilty.

And if you're united to him today in his resurrection, God says to you that you will commune with the God you were made for forever and there's no getting out from underneath it.

Now, we can't say anything today about following Jesus actively, which we're coming to now. Becoming a disciple being a disciple.

We can't say anything about being a disciple without first becoming one, but even more than that. We can't say anything this morning about being a disciple if our identity is not fully rooted in the fact of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection.

[17 : 21] And that we're perpetually coming back to that and standing on that ground. And so we're going to come back to this in just a moment. But what should you do today?

Peter tells us at the beginning of Acts, if you're exploring Christianity today, there's a command. It's called the obedience of faith. And if you're a Christian today, there's a command and it's called the obedience of faith.

And here it is from Peter and Peter says, repent and believe for the forgiveness of your sins. Today, Sunday is the day of repentance and faith and repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin.

And this, you see, repentance is the acknowledgement that I do not have the resources in my own heart to understand, seek after or fulfill the great need I have before the light.

That's repentance. And then in faith, well, faith is this. In Acts 2, Peter says, you, all the crowd who was there for Pentecost, you crucified Christ.

[18 : 27] And you see true repentance and faith is saying, it's not just that I'm sorry for my sin, it's that I crucified Jesus Christ. I put Him on the cross.

And then in faith, I turned to Him like a weary traveler and hang my arms over His shoulders and rest on Him. And that's becoming a disciple.

And there's no talk of discipleship unless we're there. And so that's an invitation. Now secondly, and briefly, becoming a disciple then means transformation.

It means following Jesus to learn everything from the Master. Now this is really important. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the middle 20th century, early 20th century, the famous German pastor and theologian.

In the face of the rise of the Third Reich and Hitler and Nazism, Bonhoeffer looked out and he was so concerned that the church in Germany had not stood up against all that Hitler came to do and say.

[19 : 34] And he wrote a book later on called The Cost of Discipleship where he reflected on that problem. And he coined a very famous phrase. He talked about the danger of cheap grace.

And this is what he says about it. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship.

Cheap grace is grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ Himself in His example. In other words, cheap grace is saying, I'm forgiven but I don't want the cost of following Jesus for all of my days.

And another theologian puts it like this. Salvation is a free gift of God's grace earned by the work of Jesus Christ alone. There's nothing you can do to get it but trust in Him and this free gift will cost you everything.

And so there's no sales pitch in Christianity, not at all. Because Jesus Christ has done a great work to deal with our need, our need of forgiveness, judgment, and communion with God.

[20 : 42] And then he comes and says, follow me. And that following is very costly. It will cost your time, your talent, and your treasure from top to bottom to be a true disciple. Now let me just rattle off to you four aspects of discipleship from this passage briefly.

The first one we see here, and every one of these needs a sermon, but I won't give one. I won't give a sermon on each of them. True discipleship means abiding communion.

Saul is encountered by the light and he's blinded and then God in the middle of the passage raises up another disciple, Ananias, to come into aid Saul.

And Alberto Valdez, a commentator, this is what he says about this. In the vision the Lord tells Ananias, arise and go to the street called straight, the principal thoroughfare of Damascus.

Once on straight street Ananias would seek the house of Judas, which is a place where they were gathering for worship. Then he would ask for one called Saul of Tarsus.

[21 : 47] And Luke reveals what Saul had done for the past three days. He says he prayed for three days. God had taken Saul from a wayward and misguided path to straight street and into the house of praise and for three days he did nothing but communed with the living God.

Discipleship following Jesus first, groundwork, means seeking and abiding living communion with God in your daily life.

And I know that's basic and simple, but let me say that we are all up and down. If you're a Christian today, you know probably if you're like me that you're up and down with communion with God.

And as one pastor put it, we are spiritually bipolar when it comes to our abiding communion with the living God. And in order to move forward on this, you've actually got to go back to becoming a disciple again and look at the cross of Jesus Christ and know that Jesus Christ finds you as such an object of love that he would come into the world and die for you.

That's so important because you cannot be motivated to commune with God by your guilt. It won't work. Instead, you've got to be changed by seeing how much the Lord loves you in order to get back on the horse and walk with the living God this week.

[23 : 28] Discipleship goes nowhere unless you're seeking a living relationship with Christ, not based on your need to be accepted, but because you already are.

That's absolutely fundamental. And so many of us today will say with me, you know, I struggle here to have an abiding daily relationship and communion with the living God.

And let me say to you, of course, because you're still a sinner and there is therefore now no condemnation for you because you are in Christ Jesus. And secondly, a challenge.

Are you, let me ask you this. Are you focusing more on the goods of Christianity, the community, which is a great good forgiveness, which is a great good, but missing that you've been saved to commune with the beauty of Jesus Christ himself?

Do you want the community without the man? Do you want him run back to him and seek his face today? That's the key, actually, to growing in an abiding relationship is seeking the face of Jesus Christ himself.

[24 : 39] All right. Secondly, it means holistic transformation. It means not only abiding communion, but also growing out of that holistic transformation.

Now I say holistic transformation here because true discipleship is not just a change in external behavior.

And a lot of times in the public, in society, people know Christians as being ones, people know Christians by what they don't do and by what they reject.

And actually what the New Testament brings us back to over and over again is that deep change is change of who you are from the inside out, from your heart unto your actions and not the other way around.

Now just two verses here. Verse 17, it says that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. And in verse 31, we didn't read that, but it says the church was continually walking in the fear of the Lord.

[25 : 40] And you see that, that is the passive and active aspect of transformation. True disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit. God is doing the work in you all the time.

And you're also walking in the fear of the Lord actively. And in those two things, you're slowly, a slow burn change in your heart to wanting God over the course of your life more than the things of this world.

And it's both passive first, but also active at the very same time. And so today, again, you say like me, I don't know how much I've actually changed since I've come to believe on Jesus.

I don't really know how much I've grown. And let me say again, step one, go back to point one, becoming a disciple. There is no condemnation for you who are in Christ Jesus.

You are an object of love that Christ came to die for, but then resolved to do what John Owen called us to do, kill your sin, lest it be killing you.

[26 : 44] In other words, we've got today to go back to our first love once more and to love God because he is lovely, not because he's useful.

You see, and this is the key to transformation and we'll move on. But whenever you're tempted, if your desire to no longer sin is merely a desire based on the consequences of that sin, the people you might hurt, getting caught, things that it might, the trouble it might create for you in your life, then you can never change long term.

Your change will only ever be short term. But if when temptation comes, you want God, not because he's useful, but because he's lovely. You say, I don't want to sin, I want to push this away, I want to kill this sin because I don't want to grieve the God who loved me so much that he would come for me in the middle of history.

That's actually the secret to deep change. It's actually wanting God more than the consequences. It's seeing him as lovely before he's ever useful.

And that's the secret to deep change. Now thirdly and fourth, I'm just going to rattle these off because our time is running out. Third, discipleship means instrumentalization.

[28 : 04] Very practical here. Ananias in verse 13 says, Saul is going to arrest me. The Lord speaks to Ananias and Ananias turns and says to God, have you heard about Saul?

He's been murdering all the Christians and you want me to go find him. And God says, get up and go, and Ananias gets up and he goes.

And he's scared, but he goes. And he says, Saul is going to be a great instrument in my hand, and I'm going to wield him to all the peoples of Europe.

And you look at Ananias, you look at Saul, and we learn this, that discipleship means instrumentalization. In other words, it means having a willingness and heart to be used, to be spent, to be an instrument in the Redeemer's hand, to spend your time, your talents, your treasures for the sake of the kingdom of God, and to be tired, to be afraid and to be tired in the midst of it.

It's a willingness to take risks for the kingdom of God. And we see that here. Paul's life is such a great example of the cost of discipleship. There was nothing cheap grace about it.

[29 : 20] It cost him everything. There was a willingness to be spent. Now, fourthly and finally, discipleship means embrace. Ananias also in verse 13, remember, God says, Ananias, go find Paul.

He says, that's the guy who merges Christians, but he gets up and he goes. And the first word that comes out of Ananias' mouth when he gets to the house of Judas, they open the door, there's Saul and Ananias says, brother.

And that means that if Jesus Christ is your Messiah today, no matter what wrongs you've done to other people within the family of God, you are adopted into the household of faith and there's nothing you can do about it.

You come today. It's one thing to say, I go to church. If you're a Christian, you are in the church, period, whether you like it or not, whether you go or not, you're in the church, you're stuck in because you're united to Jesus' body and that's what Saul immediately becomes brother.

He becomes a brother. And let me just say today that actually discipleship, so much of God's plan for our discipleship is dependent upon full immersion into the family of God.

[30 : 39] And so today, if you've been around for a little while and you're not fully stuck in here to this church or you're visiting today and you're not fully stuck in to your church, there as much as you can be in person when you can and if you can, giving, serving, knowing, being hospitable, spending yourself, then you're actually missing one of the most significant aspects of what it means to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

So let's close and take stock. And let me just ask you a question about each of these very quickly. Take stock, these diagnostic questions.

Ask them of yourself. I'm asking them of myself and let's be honest about where we are here. When it comes to abiding communion, do I love Christ because he is altogether lovely?

And so do I seek him in my daily life. And when it comes to holistic transformation, do I fight my sins, the sins that keep coming to get me because I love to honor the Lord who's come for me?

And so am I putting pieces in place in my life to push away the sins, to kill the sins that keep killing me? Third, in instrumentalization, am I willing to go anywhere that God may call me?

[32 : 07] Do I have that willingness in my heart to be spent, to give my time, my talent, my treasure? And fourth, in the embrace of God's people, am I stuck into the community of Jesus Christ that God has put me in in this season, giving, serving, showing hospitality because God is worth it?

Now the last word, all disciples, every disciple of Jesus Christ, true disciples find themselves in a season where we are not walking in the fear of the Lord.

And we're not growing. And let me say that Jesus today comes to you. Hear the call to worship one more time.

Jesus comes and says, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened by these questions. And know that the condition of you being accepted into the kingdom of God is not how well you could answer them.

But because Jesus Christ has come and said, rest in me. That's the whole point. He came to you. He came to you. You never came to Him. He came to get you in the middle of history.

[33 : 21] And so today He's saying, no matter where you are in this, come back to me and stand on the ground of grace. It's the whole point. He came for the sick and He wants you to come to Him once more.

And so standing in grace, we can resolve today that on Monday, Monday is a great day because it's a new work week. It's a great day to start and say, I am resolved to learn all that Jesus commanded.

So let's pray and ask for these hearts. Father, we long to be disciples that do not stand on a cheap grace.

And so we ask, Father, that the Holy Spirit would be at work among us to work in our hearts, that we would desire all that you command and we would be given the power to do it.

So we ask, Lord, for the deep change in our hearts that would turn us away from our daily sins and towards following Jesus all the way.

[34 : 19] And so we ask this, standing on grace above all else in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.