

Learning & Growing Together

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[0 : 00] This morning we are continuing a study that we've begun on discipleship. We want to focus on this because it's a crucial aspect of our lives as Christians.

Often we can spend a lot of time emphasizing the need to become a Christian and rightly so because there's nothing more important than that. But at the same time it's essential that we spend time talking and thinking about how we live our lives as Christians and that's what we mean by discipleship. And in order to help us with this great topic we are using the image of a tree. And the reason we're doing that is because it's a theme that runs through the whole of Scripture. But in many ways a key text for us is the passage that Derek preached on two weeks ago in Jeremiah 17 verses 7 and 8.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when the heat comes for its leaves remain green and it is not anxious in the year of drought for it does not cease to bear fruit. On the basis of this image of a tree we've identified five key aspects of discipleship which all relate to the tree image. These are on cards which were issued last week. There's spare ones in the table at the back so if you didn't get one there's a weak card that looks just like this. As disciples we are first and foremost rooted and living in Christ. Just as a tree is rooted to the ground and draws life from the ground as disciples we are rooted and living in Christ. But as a tree grows so too do we and as disciples we are learning and growing together. A tree has many branches each look different but all perform a function as disciples we serve together in unity. A tree provides a wonderful sort of shelter and as disciples we are to love and protect one another and a tree once it's grown can bear fruit for others that people can see and that people can taste and that people can benefit from. And so we're going to look at all of these one by one.

Last week we looked at the first and saw that as disciples we are rooted and living in Christ. That's what a Christian is somebody who is united to Jesus and on the basis of our union with Christ and in the strength of that union we want to live our lives for him. And in many ways that's the overarching truth that's why it's the big one in the middle. It is the fact that we are as we are rooted and living in Christ that's that's the overarching truth over all our lives as disciples. This week we're going to look on to the second aspect that we've identified on our card and the fact that as disciples rooted and living in Christ we are learning and growing together. You can see it at the top of the card. As we do so let's turn back to Ephesians chapter 4. We'll look at various parts of this chapter we can read again verses 11 to 13. He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Learning is a crucial aspect of being a disciple. In fact that's what the Greek word for disciple actually means. A disciple is a learner and as Christians we follow Jesus and we learn from him. That's seen very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount which in many ways is the key passage about discipleship in the Bible. As we read at the start when Jesus began that sermon Matthew records that seeing the crowds

[4 : 01] Jesus went up on the mountain and when he sat down his disciples came to him and he opened his mouth and taught them. As disciples we learn and as we learn we grow. So we have this at a foundational level the fact that we are united to Jesus rooted and living in him but from that foundation we embark on this amazing journey of growth as we learn more and more. Paul speaks about that in Ephesians 4. We grow in our knowledge of Jesus and we move towards maturity but it's a theme that runs through the whole of the New Testament.

Peter says the same thing he says grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So I want us to recognize that as we were saying last week the New Testament doesn't say

to us as disciples you need to be rooted and living in Christ because we already are if we are believing in Jesus but the New Testament does say that now that you are rooted and living in Christ you need to learn and grow together. And all of this means that one of the most important aspects of our discipleship is our thinking. In fact one of the definitions for the Greek word disciple which I read this week said that a disciple is someone who directs their mind towards something. And I think it's very important to recognize that because sometimes it's an aspect that we can neglect. Sometimes we can think that Christianity is just a matter of our hearts. It's about my personal faith, about my relationship with

Jesus. It's all about my heart. Sometimes we emphasize the fact that our Christian lives are all about our outward living. So we need to walk the walk, we need to show our faith in action and both of these are absolutely true. But alongside the inward condition of our hearts and the outward way in which we live our lives we must never ever forget that at the center of biblical Christian discipleship is a transformation of our minds. That means that as disciples of Jesus we all need to think. And of course that that should make perfect sense because if you ask the question how is it that you become a disciple? What do you do to enter the kingdom of God? The answer is that we repent and believe. That was Jesus's call when he began preaching the Gospel.

He called us to repent and that word repent what does it mean? It means to change the way you think. As disciples we are now to think differently. We're no longer unbelievers and we begin this amazing journey of discovery where we learn the truth from our teacher and our King Jesus Christ. And one of the reasons why it's very important to emphasize that is because I think our culture around us thinks that if you're going to have faith then you need to switch off your brain. It's the idea that that faith is mindless and irrational but that is utterly untrue. Mindless Christianity is absolutely not biblical Christianity.

The Bible is totally bound up with a concern for the way in which you and I think. And really the great message of the Bible is that the truth of Scripture is the only way that our minds can make sense of the world around us. And I think we would all recognize that in many ways so many of our struggles and difficulties come from wrong thinking. So the worries and fears and insecurities that we all have they come from thoughts that plague us.

[8 : 06] So many of the mistakes that we make where we hurt ourselves or we hurt other people they start out from thinking foolish things. If I look back at my life at everything I regret in all of those situations I can say I wish I thought differently. And so much of the hostility that we see in the world around us comes from a mindset that's broken and corrupted by sin. If you think of a terrorist what's the first thing that a terrorist does? He thinks and everything follows from there. Paul recognizes this in verses 17 to 19 he emphasizes that at the heart of discipleship is turning away from the futile and empty thinking of the world around us. As disciples our minds are very important we are learners and as we learn we grow. So I want us just to think about this together in a wee bit more detail and to do so we're going to ask three very simple questions.

What do we learn? How do we learn? And why should we learn? But before we do so I just want to highlight one very important point. The fact that we that as disciples we are learners emphasizes something absolutely crucial. It reminds us of the fact that we don't know it all. When we speak about learning and growing it's very easy to think well I hardly know anything so I'm not cut out for discipleship and it's easy to feel intimidated and inferior but the amazing thing is that if you look at yourself and think well I've got so much to learn that does not mean that you aren't cut out for discipleship it means that you are perfect for discipleship. Every single one of us is a learner. Every single one of us has tons to learn. Every single one of us here knows some stuff and doesn't know other stuff. Every one of us is learning every day. There is absolutely no such thing as a disciple who knows it all. And so if you feel like you're standing before Jesus and saying to him I don't know very much I think

Jesus's reply would be perfect. Follow me. That's why the journey of learning and growing as disciples is not intimidating. It's really exciting. So our first question what do we learn? Well we could say well at a basic level we need to learn Bible stuff as disciples. That's the kind of simple answer to that question isn't it? When it comes to being a Christian there's lots of stuff to learn. We need to learn things like this. We need to learn theology. We need to learn about who God is and what he's done. We need to learn about morality. We need to learn that there's certain behavior that's appropriate, certain behavior that's inappropriate. We need to learn about church but what it means to be a member of the church. We need to learn about what's going on in other parts of the

church around the world and we need to learn about life in general. How we should live our lives. What we should devote our energy. What we should prioritize. And that's that's all pretty obvious. There's lots to learn. Some of it is very straightforward. So as a disciple you'll go to the Bible and it'll teach you that you need to pray and that seems really straightforward and obvious. Some of it is completely counter-cultural and it's the opposite to what the world around us thinks. Like the fact that as disciples a Christian couple will not live together or sleep together until they're married. That's the opposite of the way the world around us thinks. So some of it's simple, some of it's very counter-cultural and some of it is just mind-blowing. Like the fact that God would give his only precious beloved son to suffer and die in utter agony. Because he wants to save you and because he loves you that much. So when it comes to reading a part of the Bible whether it's the letter to Ephesians here or whichever part it may be I hope that as disciples we would all say I want to learn what that teaches me about God and I want to learn what this teaches me about how I should live. However having said all of that if you look at Ephesians 4, in fact if you look at the whole of the New Testament you'll discover that our learning is not really about knowing Bible stuff. In fact it's not really about that at all. As disciples we are not learning in order to get to know some things. As disciples we are learning in order to get to know someone. As Paul says in this chapter verse 13 we're aiming to grow in the knowledge of the Son of God and in the chapter he talks about the fact that we learn Christ and the truth that is in him. And that's a really important thing to recognize.

[13:20] Discipleship is not really about knowing Bible stuff or church stuff. Discipleship is about knowing God through Jesus Christ. And I want you just to think about that for a moment. Is there a difference between knowing something and knowing someone? There's a massive difference isn't there? Knowing something means that you have information. Knowing someone means that you have a relationship. And at the heart of being a disciple is the fact that we now have a relationship with Jesus as our Lord, our teacher, our brother and our friend. And we want to learn not in order to know stuff, even if it's Bible stuff, we want to learn in order to know him. And that's really what the Bible means when it talks about knowledge. In the biblical sense to know someone means to have a relationship with them and to love them in the deepest and most profound way. And that's what lies at the heart of the eternal life that Jesus gives us. He says this is eternal life that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. And all the stuff that we learn and after that the truth that we seek to understand, the instructions we aim to follow, the standards we strive to meet, the priorities that we endeavor to have.

None of that is about doing what Christians do because that's the club that we're in. It's about doing what Jesus wants because we love him and we're getting to know him. And that's why what we learn should have a massive effect on the way we live. And throughout the Bible you'll see that there's this constant emphasis in the fact that what we know should shape the way we live our lives. We see that in Ephesians. In the first part of that letter, chapters one, two and three, Paul gives us tons of information about what God has done for us in Jesus.

And then in chapter four he says, therefore walk, in other words, therefore now live your lives in the light of all of this truth. Our aim is not to learn so that our heads are just full of knowledge. Our aim is to learn so that every part of our lives are shaped by the fact that we are rooted and living in Christ. But as we learn the various instructions and information that the Bible gives us, it's vital that we remember the relationship that lies behind all of that information. So you can go to a part of the Bible like Ephesians 4 and you'll find lots of instructions telling you to do stuff, telling you to not do stuff.

There's some examples there. So verse 29 says, let no corrupt in talk comes out of your mouth. Verse 31 says put away bitterness. Verse 32 says forgive one another and there's many, many more. As disciples we have to learn these instructions and we have to live by them. But if that's just bare information, then it can seem like just a kind of moral to-do list that we have to try and match up to. Just a big long list of do's and don'ts. But the truth is behind all of these instructions is a relationship and it's because of the relationship that we get these instructions. Jesus is not a slave driver who just wants us to do what he says. Jesus is a loving master who knows that corrupt in talk can destroy someone's life. Bitterness can eat away at you like a cancer and when you are wronged the only way that you can be fully healed is to forgive. In other words all of these instructions are given to us because Jesus loves us so much.

[17 : 31] It's really easy to think that if we follow Jesus' instructions he will love us more. It's not true. The truth is the whole reason we have these instructions is because he loves us already more than we could ever know.

And that's why his teaching is a brilliant thing to learn. Question two, how do we learn? What does learning and growing involve? Well there's a lot that we could say here. I just want to highlight some very brief points but I think that there's several principles that are involved in learning and growing and it's maybe helpful to remember these. So first of all, learning involves community. That's something we maybe don't think of but it's a crucial aspect of all areas of knowledge. Learning is a community activity. So a baby learns from her parents. That's a community. A child learns in their classroom. That's a community. A sportsman learns from their coach and their teammates. That's a community and even if you read a book on your own you're relying on the work of the author, the printer, the publisher. That's a community. All learning is a community activity. And it's a great example that if one person in the world believes that pigs can fly, the rest of the community, the rest of the world shows that that's persons not learnt anything. They're actually mad. Learning is a community activity. That's true of every area of knowledge. It's especially true in discipleship. Even this letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesians, that's in a community setting. It's to a group with which he has a connection. And that's why we learn and grow together. That's why we're here today, a church studying God's word. That's why we have city group and engine room, our midweek prayer meeting each week so that we can learn and grow together. That's why we want to encourage you to meet up for one-to-one support with another disciple.

As disciples we're learning together. We learn with each other. We learn from each other. We do it as a community. Learning involves commitment. Every aspect of learning takes time, whatever that may be, and it's absolutely true in the Christian life. If you think of a tree, a tree grows very slowly. It's not the finished article overnight. It's a long-term process. Growing and learning takes time. And as disciples we are embarking on a journey of learning where bit by bit we grow in our knowledge of Jesus. In many ways a disciple is committing to a lifetime of learning. In fact a disciple is committing to an eternity of learning where we discover more and more about God. But that commitment that learning involves is incredibly rewarding. There is so much to learn as a follower of Jesus and everything we learn is amazing. That's one of the brilliant things about our future as Christians. We will be learning forever. That means that we will be saying wow forever as we discover more and more about Jesus. So learning is rewarding but it does involve commitment. That's why we want to roll up our sleeves and go for it. So whoever you are, let's read, let's talk, let's learn about the Bible together. Learning also involves humility. As disciples if we are going to be learners that means that we have to be teachable. And sometimes it can be hard to be teachable. Sometimes we can think that we know it all. Surprisingly especially when you're young you think it would be the other way around. I remember I think I could sum up my teens and twenties as my teens thinking I knew it all and in my 20s thinking oh man I was such an idiot. We need to be teachable. Never ever forget that in discipleship it is absolutely okay to say I don't know. So you might face a situation, you might be asked a question, you might be confronted by something. It is absolutely okay to say I don't know. I'll need to ask someone. I'll need to find out more. And it's also really good to ask questions. That's a wonderful thing to do in our discipleship so that we learn and grow together.

Learning also involves mistakes. So if you're learning to walk, to talk, if you're learning a new language, if you're learning a new piece of technology, one thing is guaranteed. You're going to make mistakes and that's too in discipleship as well. We all make mistakes. Now that doesn't mean that you can say oh well I can make as many mistakes as I want. I can sin as much as I like. Please don't ever ever think like that. But at the same time please remember that mistakes will happen. Sometimes mistakes are the only things that will teach us.

And sometimes learning can be a painful process. But ultimately that's for our good. So learning involves community, it involves commitment, it involves humility, it involves mistakes. Most of all learning involves faith. And that's true in every area of knowledge. Whether it's trusting our senses when we're trying to observe the world around us. Whether it's trusting a teacher or a lecturer or an author who's telling us something. Whether it's trusting our systems and theories to hold true. Or whether it's even trusting our Supreme Court to sort out a difficult question. The active principle in all knowledge is faith.

[23 : 44] Learning involves trust. And that's absolutely true in discipleship. All of our learning is grounded on our faith in Jesus. We are trusting that he is the truth. And we are following him

because he is the way. And that raises the question that every single person in here has to consider. In terms of what you know. In terms of what you would regard as the secure knowledge of your life. In terms of the knowledge that you stake everything on. Who are you trusting? We learn through community, commitment, humility, mistakes and faith. Finally we're going to ask the question why should we learn? What difference does it make? And again there's lots we could say. Overall learning is simply the natural response to revelation. In the Bible God is speaking to us so it's crazy to do anything other than listen and learn what he's saying. And in that process of listening and learning there are some wonderful effects that it has on us as we grow as disciples of Jesus. Learning encourages us. We see that at the beginning of Ephesians. Paul says I do not cease to give thanks for you remembering you in my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ the Father of glory may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation and the knowledge of him. Have in the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know what is the hope to which he's called you. What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. Here he's saying that the knowledge and enlightening that we have can give us hope. And this is where we have to always remember that the Gospel is good news. It's a message of hope, of peace, of security, of comfort, of friendship, of love. And the more you learn of that the more you can take with you into the week ahead and all the challenges that that can bring. Learning encourages us. Learning also reassures us. In chapter 2 we see it says but now in

Christ Jesus you who are once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ for he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. Never ever forget that the solid truth that we learn in the Bible always trumps the stuff that we are being told by our feelings. And there's a great example of that in verse 13. Very often we feel that we are far off from God so see the two words far off. That's a common feeling for disciples. We think that we've mucked up, we've failed God, we are far away from what we should be. That's a feeling but the truth is those who are far off have been brought near and so the words far off are a feeling we often have but brought near is a fact and the fact always trumps the feeling. God has brought you near. He is holding you and he will never ever let you go. Learning can reassure us. Learning also challenges us. We can see an example of that at the end of Ephesians 4 with these instructions, let no corrupt in talk come out of your mouths but only such as is good for building up as fit for the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear. Do not leave the Holy Spirit of God by whom you are sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender hearted for giving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

Learning will challenge us. It'll challenge us to think differently. It'll challenge us to behave differently. It'll challenge us to react differently. But if there's one thing that's true of you as a disciple going into the week ahead you should be different. So when your colleagues are slagging someone off behind their back, when your friends are being critical of somebody who's made a mistake, when people around you are being lazy or selfish, we should be really, really different. Learning also changes us. Paul speaks about that. He says to put off your old self which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds. To put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Ultimately discipleship is a great journey of restoration back into bearing the image of God. We are learning and growing more and more so that we can become more and more like Jesus. Learning equips us. That's what we have in verse 11 and 12. He gave the apostles the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints, the disciples for works of ministry. But that's next week's sermon where we look at serving in a bit more detail. Two more. Learning protects us so that we may not be no longer children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning and craftiness in deceitful schemes. Learning gives us a stability and it keeps us from being led astray. It protects us from thinking that God doesn't like us and that we have to earn his favor. It protects us from thinking that sin is not that serious and we can do whatever we like.

It protects us from thinking that we're not that gifted and can't serve. It protects us from thinking that we know it all. It protects us from thinking that we're not worth anything. Learning will protect us. But more than anything else, learning amazes us. And there's a great example of that in Ephesians 3, just the chapter before, that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith that you being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and

length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. And it's that statement at the start of verse 19 where we're told that that Jesus wants you to learn about the fact that he loves you with a love that is bigger and greater and stronger than anything that your mind can cope with.

It's a love that surpasses knowledge. In other words, he wants you to learn about his mind-blowing love for you. That is why learning and growing as disciples is amazing. Let's pray together.

[31 : 19] God our Father, we acknowledge that we have so much to learn and so often in life we can think that we know it all, that we know who we are, we know what we need, we know what life's about. And yet the truth is we are tiny specks in a massive universe and we hardly know anything. But we thank you so much that you have revealed yourself to us in and through your Son Jesus. And we thank you that in Him we find that tiny specks like us are actually incredibly precious to you. And we pray, O Lord, that as your disciples we would learn more and more of the amazing love that you have for us and that we would apply all the truths of your word to every part of our lives. We pray that we will be humble and teachable. We pray that we would every week be learning and growing together. In

Jesus name we pray. Amen.