

A Growing Forest

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Date: 03 November 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Those of you who come along each week will know that over the past two months or so in our morning services we have been thinking about discipleship, about how we are to live our lives as followers of Jesus.

And today we come to the final part of our series, but our hope is that discipleship is something that we will always be thinking about as we go on in our lives as followers of our Savior.

In order to help us think about discipleship we've been using the image of the tree. And this is a theme that runs through the whole of Scripture.

If you remember way back to the beginning of our series we looked at the words of Jeremiah chapter 17 which say, Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord.

He's like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when 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.

[1 : 0 2] The tree image is one that runs through the whole of the Bible as a picture to help us understand what our lives should look like as God's people. And in order to try and unpack this a little bit more and apply it to our lives we've identified five key areas that arise from this image.

These are summarized in the image on the screen and also on little cards that we gave out at the start of the series which if you didn't get one there's still lots of them available on the table at the back.

These are the five things that we've looked at together over the past couple of months. As disciples first and foremost we are rooted and living in Christ. That's the whole basis of our status as Christians.

We are united to Jesus by faith and we live in and through our connection to Him. As disciples we are learning and growing together.

That's what the word disciple means to be a learner. We learn from what Jesus said and from his example and as a result our minds are being transformed and renewed.

[2 : 0 8] As disciples we are striving to serve together in unity. So discipleship is not just some theoretical thing, it's not something that we just keep in our minds. It has very practical outworking in our lives as we seek to obey Jesus as our Lord and as we seek to use our gifts to serve Him.

As disciples we are to be loving and protecting one another. We're never disciples in isolation. It's not an individualistic thing. One of our key priorities is to love one another and to protect one another as friends, as brothers and sisters in God's family.

I think it was last week or the week before, it would have been the week before, and Derek looked at the fact that as disciples we are seeking to bear fruit for others. We never want to keep our discipleship, our relationship with Jesus, a secret.

We want it to be shown outwardly so that it's visible and real and other people can see it and can benefit from the good that we seek to do as we follow Jesus.

And all these aspects of discipleship are captured very well by the tree image. We are rooted in Jesus, just as a tree has roots going into the ground. We serve together, so a tree has lots and lots of different branches, none of them that look the same, but they all function as one to serve a purpose.

[3 : 31] A tree is a brilliant place to find shelter and protection, and that's a great picture of the love and care that we should show towards one another. And of course, a tree bears fruit for others to benefit from.

But there's one more aspect of the tree image that is crucial for our discipleship. A tree draws from its roots, it grows together, each part serves, it provides firm, stable, reliable protection, and it bears fruit.

There's this great movement from the roots outwardly to the fruit. But we have to ask the question, what's the primary purpose of the fruit of a tree?

What do you find in the middle of an apple, or a plum, or an orange? You find a seed.

And the great aim is that that seed will fall into the ground and grow into another tree. And this is giving us a crucial lesson for our own discipleship, because that's the goal too, that as disciples we would grow, that we would serve, that we would learn, that we would bear fruit, but we want that fruit to sow seeds in the lives of other people.

[4 : 56] In other words, the goal is not that we would just stand strong as individual disciples on our own. The goal is that we would be a growing forest with more and more people coming in.

And all of this is reminding us that there's a crucial link between discipleship and evangelism. So when we are talking about discipleship, we must not think that that's just improving ourselves as followers of Jesus.

It's not exclusively about me growing in my faith, or about us maturing as a church. That's part of it, but it's not all of it. At the heart of discipleship is also a burning desire that others would become disciples as well.

And that means that if you're not a Christian yet here today, or if you're not sure, please know that the one thing we want for you more than anything else is that you will become a disciple of Jesus too.

Jesus has given us an incredible peace and joy and hope, and we want you to have that too.

[6 : 05] And over the past couple of months or so, there's some people who've become Christians here in our congregation, and it is just the most absolutely brilliant news to hear.

When someone comes to you and says, oh, do you know that so-and-so has become a Christian? It is just absolutely brilliant. It is so thrilling. It is the most amazing thing that you can hear, because sometimes you look at people and you think, oh man, would they ever become Christians?

There was a guy who lived, who still lives in Carlyway, which is where I used to be a minister. And he had his struggles in life.

He struggled with alcohol, and in many ways he was very hostile to the church. Not hostile to the church, but he just seemed kind of a difficult person to approach in terms of the gospel.

And a predecessor in Carlyway once saw him at a funeral, and he said to himself when he saw him, he said, oh, he's a hard nut to crack.

[7 : 15] I ordained that man as an elder in Carlyway Free Church. It's just amazing what God can do. And there's nothing more brilliant than hearing that someone has come to faith.

And the joy that we feel is just a fraction of the joy that just bursts through heaven over every single sinner who repents. That's what we long for. And even more importantly, it's what Jesus longs for as well.

It's all a great reminder that discipleship and evangelism go hand in hand. And that's what I want us to think about today as we bring this series to a close.

And to do so, we're going to look together at the words at the end of Matthew chapter 28, the words of the Great Commission. Now, the 11 disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

And when they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

[8 : 26] And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. These words of Jesus are very famous, and rightly so, because they come at a crucial moment in history.

In many ways, we could almost say that this is the turning point of history. Jesus has been crucified. He is now risen and exalted as Lord over all.

As he says himself, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. And he's completed his mission to defeat sin. And now he begins his mission to restore humanity.

Now, when we look at the Bible, we tend to divide it into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament, and that's a very, very helpful division. But there's another sense in which we could divide it into the old and the new humanities.

Because the old humanity was created by God to be good, but it fell. And as a result of sin, the old humanity was alienated from God and became broken.

[9 : 33] In contrast to that is the new humanity who are being rescued from sin and who are being united to God, not alienated, united to Him, and who are being restored into the image of God.

We can still see all the effects of the brokenness of the old humanity around us. We can still see it in ourselves. But Jesus is calling us into a new humanity, a humanity that's united to Him, a humanity that's no longer broken, a humanity that is being restored.

This humanity was anticipated in the Old Testament. It was foreshadowed among the people of Israel, particularly through their descendancy from Abraham. And now, from this moment onwards, it's being realized for all nations through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And the fundamental difference between the old humanity and the new humanity is this. The old humanity is on a path to death. The new humanity is on a path to life.

And the great proof of that is that the head of the new humanity, Jesus Christ, has risen from the dead, as Matthew 28 tells us. And just as He has overcome death and is alive forever, that new resurrection life is shared with all who are united to Him in faith.

[10 : 59] His resurrection is the first fruits. It's the foretaste, the forerunner of what is going to happen to all who become part of His new humanity. That's why the promise of the gospel is what?

It's eternal life. Jesus is rescuing us from a pathway to death and placing us on a pathway to life.

And it's crucial that we remember that that is what God has always wanted for humanity. Humanity was not created to die. Humanity was created to live.

And that is why death is the most horrible enemy that we have. And that's why death is something that we recoil from more than anything else because it is wrong.

It is not something that is meant to be there. And all of this is teaching us something very important about the resurrection of Jesus. At one level, the resurrection of Jesus is utterly unique.

[11 : 59] It's a complete one-off in history. It's a stunning event. It's unprecedented, unrepeated, absolutely astonishing. People don't rise from the dead.

This is absolutely unique. The resurrection is astounding. But at another level, and I want to say this with, I hope I don't in any way sound irreverent saying this because I don't mean it in that way, there is another level in which the resurrection is actually completely normal.

Now you might think, Thomas, you have gone mad. But I think that we can say that. We can say that the resurrection is normal because, true, normal, God created humanity was never meant to die.

And the fact that Jesus has risen again, never to die again, is bringing humanity back to what it was always meant to be. God did not create us to die.

He created us to live. Death is a horrible, hideous intrusion that is not meant to be there. We are so used to it that to us it seems normal, but to God, death is utterly abnormal.

[13 : 16] And it's completely wrong. I was trying to think how to illustrate this. And I thought of birds. So imagine a massive pet shop full of birds.

Imagine like the sort of giant Walmart of bird shops. And they're all in cages, small cages, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of birds in these little cages.

And there's no room for them to fly. And that's all that they've ever known. There's thousands of them. But to them, life in a cage is just the way it is.

And then one day, one of these birds is released and it flies out of its cage, flies out the window and soars into the sky.

And you have in your minds thousands and thousands of birds stuck in cages, one soaring through the air. Which one is normal?

[14 : 21] It's the one that's soaring through the sky because that is what birds are meant to do. And the same is true of humanity. We're not created to die. We're not created to be on a path to death.

We are created to live. God is the great giver of life. And to God, the humanity that lives and never dies is normal humanity.

The resurrected Jesus is a return to what humanity is always meant to be. But the incredible thing about Jesus is that if we imagine that he's that one bird that gets to fly out the window and soar into the sky, the incredible thing about him is that he doesn't soar off into the distance and leave every bird behind.

No, he goes back into the shop. He smashes every cage door off and he says to everyone, come with me. And that is what he's doing in these verses.

He is sending out his disciples to call all nations, to come with him and to come into his new humanity. No one is excluded.

[15 : 27] No one is barred. Just for all peoples, all nations, Jesus wants all to be saved. He is calling all nations and he is calling you.

And this great commission that he's giving is emphasizing the crucial link between discipleship and evangelism. And as we think about that a wee bit more, I want us just to notice two really important points that are emphasized by Jesus.

We'll focus mostly on the first one, but they're both important. Number one, and thinking about the link between discipleship and evangelism, we want to say that evangelism is aiming to make disciples.

And then secondly, we want to say that discipleship is aiming to make evangelists. And hopefully I'll make that a bit clearer as we go on.

So first of all, evangelism is aiming to make disciples. That's what Jesus says as he sets out this great mission for the church in these verses.

[16 : 31] His command is not to go and conquer the world with military force. It's not to go and take over the government of nations. No, the command is to go and make disciples of all nations.

You can see it there in verse 19. The aim of evangelism is that people all over the world would turn to Jesus, follow him, and live as his disciples.

And all who do become part of the new humanity that is united to Jesus. But we have to ask ourselves, well, what does that new humanity look like?

And I think that we can say four things, all of which that I think are actually either directly said or indirectly implied in the verses before us.

First of all, we can say that this new humanity is a humanity that is learning and growing together. Look at the first word of verse 20.

[17 : 28] A key part of the Great Commission is teaching. As people are called into this new humanity, they are to be taught. In other words, they are to be learners.

And as we've seen as disciples, we learn from Jesus, from his words, his actions, his example. And there's a huge amount that we can learn from Jesus, but we can sum up all the teaching from Jesus in one word.

What is it that Jesus teaches us? He teaches us the truth. Jesus teaches us what's true.

And that applies in lots of ways. It applies in a sort of negative sense in that Jesus teaches us the truth about what's wrong with the world.

And this is what's fascinating is that if you look at the old humanity around us, the humanity that is not following Jesus, and you ask that humanity, what's wrong with the world?

[18 : 32] The old humanity almost always concludes that our biggest problem is other people. And it manifests itself in loads of different ways.

So for the people who don't want Brexit, the people in power in Westminster who do want Brexit, they are the problem. Likewise, the opposite is true. For the people who do want Brexit, the people in power in Brussels are the problem.

For some people, immigrants are the problem. For others, people who don't share their views on certain things are the problem. For environmentalists, people who are damaging the world are a problem.

For some, capitalists are the problem. For others, socialists are the problem. For some people, it's just another group of football supporters who are the problem.

The old humanity is always dividing itself into groups and parties where other people are the problem. And sometimes it can be so intense that it needs to violence and war.

[19 : 30] And sometimes it can turn inwardly where we look at ourselves and we see ourselves as the biggest problem. And behind it all lies a negative view of certain people.

Jesus teaches us the truth. And he teaches us that humanity's problem is not other people. Humanity's problem is sin.

Sin is the hideous intrusion into humanity. Sin has left us broken. Sin is the problem. Sin is the common enemy. Sin has wrecked the world. So often humanity turns on itself and sees other people as the problem.

And it's tragic throughout the whole history of humanity. But Jesus tells us the truth. Humanity is not the problem. That is why Jesus, unlike pretty much every other major leader in the history of humanity, did not engage with conflict with other humans.

He engaged in conflict with sin. And he won. He dealt with the real problem that we face.

[20 : 38] And that's why he's calling us into a restored humanity that turns away from sin and follows him instead. But not only does Jesus teach us that other humans are not the problem.

He teaches us something else incredible. He actually teaches us that other humans are worth dying for.

And that's the real truth about you as a human. That to Jesus you are worth dying for.

And I don't know of anything else that comes even remotely close to telling you how precious you are. That's what you're really worth in Jesus' eyes.

But it's not only you. It's not only people of Edinburgh, people of Scotland who are worth dying for. Everyone is worth dying for. That's why Jesus is saying go to all nations and call them into my kingdom.

[21 : 39] And again, that's absolutely incredible because does anybody else call all nations to come and benefit from the resources that they have? So does Scotland say to the whole of the rest of the world, we've got loads of oil, come, help yourselves?

Does America say, come everyone, we've got all this software that we've developed, come, take it for free? Did Japan and China say we've got all this technology and an astoundingly skilled workforce, come and just use it for nothing?

No, nobody ever says that. Jesus says, come all nations and I will give you eternal life for free.

Jesus will teach you the truth. Becoming if you become a disciple of Jesus, you will learn amazing things. So it's a humanity that's learning together.

It's also humanity that is serving in unity, the Great Commission speaks about authority in verse 18, it speaks about commandments in verse 20.

[22 : 45] The risen Jesus is our Lord and our King. He has authority over us and his commands are to be obeyed as disciples we are to serve him.

Now we can immediately recoil from that kind of language because we don't really like the idea of obeying anyone. But so people will talk about, well, Jesus is going to be Lord, we're going to obey him and tie and keep his commandments in their lives and we think, I don't want to do that, I don't want to obey anybody.

But of course that kind of reaction is a wee bit silly because we actually obey people all the time. So there's a roadblock, just 100 yards down from the church just now, which is a massive inconvenience for getting to church today.

How many of you just smashed through it and thought, I'm just going to park at church? How many of you have kind of wandered down to the bottom of the royal mile and knocked on the parliament door and said, see this council tax bill, you can keep it, I'm not paying?

None of us. We actually all obey people all the time because obedience is not a great restriction, obedience actually gives freedom, obedience to authority is essential to order and peace and stability.

[24 : 04] That's why civil disobedience on a large scale is never called freedom, it's called rioting. And ultimately, all authority belongs to Jesus.

But the amazing thing about Jesus is that he has absolute authority and he is absolutely good. John summarized that beautifully in his prayer where he said that Jesus is worthy of the authority that he has.

And that's because he is so good. Following his commandments, serving him in obedience is not going to make life worse, it's only ever going to make life better.

So we have lots of examples set before us in the Bible. When somebody hurts you, the old humanity will say, get them back. In the new humanity, Jesus says, forgive them.

When someone provokes you in the old humanity, you'll be told, show them who's boss. In the new humanity, Jesus says, turn the other cheek. When you see someone in need, the old humanity will often say, I'm too busy.

[25 : 13] In the new humanity, Jesus says, you need to help them. When someone is your enemy, the old humanity will say, hate them.

In the new humanity, Jesus says, you need to love them. Which humanity is better? And not only that, serving and obeying Jesus gives us purpose in our lives.

So if you become a disciple of Jesus, you have a new master and a new purpose, which means instead of going through every day and every week doing the same old job and the same old routine and the same old grind, you get to live every single day for Jesus.

And that means that even if you give someone a cup of water or if you say a prayer for a struggling friend, if you give to help someone who's in need, if you try to encourage your colleague who is struggling, maybe nobody in the whole world will notice.

But the king of the universe, Jesus Christ is watching you and he says, good on you. That's exactly what I want you to be doing.

[26 : 16] The new humanity is one that's serving in unity. It's also a humanity that is loving and protecting one another. In verse 19, Jesus emphasizes that a key part of the church's great mission is that disciples are to be baptized.

And part of the purpose of baptism is that it's the great outward sign that somebody has become part of the new humanity. If you read through the book of Acts, which will tell you the story of the first 30 years or so of the Christian church, you'll see that all the people who became disciples are baptized.

It's an outward sign of membership of the church, of membership of the new humanity, which our new Catholicism for today so wonderfully and synchronizingly reinforced for us.

Baptism is not what brings you into the new humanity. It's a sign that you are part of it. And in serving that purpose, it's a great symbol of community.

It's a shared sign that all disciples have to show that we're united as a community in Jesus. And that's pointing us to the fact that this new humanity is a beautiful, united community that loves one another, cares for one another, and protects one another.

[27 : 34] Now, you and I know that there are so many times that the church has failed in that area, and that's a desperate tragedy. And it's tragic because the humanity that Jesus is calling us into is one where rule number one is that we are to love God and love one another.

And as disciples, we want to live in such a way that the defining characteristic of our lives is that the people who know us can look at us and say, that person loves God and they love me.

And that's one of the amazing things that Jesus does when we become His disciples. He takes a whole host of men and women, boys and girls who are completely different. So you've got rich, poor, urban, rural, different nationalities, different personalities, different gifts, different strengths, weaknesses, fears, failures.

Jesus brings all these completely incompatible people together, and they love each other. As disciples, we are united and baptized into one brilliant family that stretches across the nations.

And the door is always open for more. It's a humanity that's loving and protecting one another. And it's a humanity that is bearing fruit.

[28 : 50] In many ways, that's what defines the new humanity in Jesus. We are to bear fruit. So as we go out into the world, as Jesus commands us, in our going at the start of verse 19, we are to go and bear good fruit.

And in evangelizing, we long to see others become disciples so that they will bear fruit too. And the result is that the new humanity that Jesus is creating is a humanity of good fruit.

Now you can look back over history and you can look out over the world today, and you can see that there is a lot of bad, rotten, horrible fruit in people's lives.

But you can also look back over history and look over the world today and see that where Jesus is being followed, there you will find amazing good fruit.

And I saw an astounding example of this this week. I'm sure many of you will have seen this, a video that was shared through various news outlets of this man.

[29 : 56] His name is Brant Jean, or Jean, I don't know how to pronounce it. He lives in the US and his brother was killed.

His brother was killed by a police officer who mistook him for an intruder and shot him dead. And that man sitting there at the court case for this police officer who had killed his brother.

And you can search it on YouTube, it's quite easy to find, if you just type in Brant, B-R-A-N-D-T, Jean, G-E-A-N, I'm sure you'll find it.

And this man sat there and spoke to the police officer, the woman who had killed his brother, and he said, I forgive you, and I want nothing but good for you.

And he said, in fact, I want the best for you. And the best that can happen for you is for you to come to Jesus because I forgive you and he will forgive you.

[31 : 07] He said, I don't even want you to go to jail, I just want the best for you. And he says, I know that that's what my brother would say as well.

And then he turned to the judge and he said, I don't know if this is allowed, but can I go and give her a hug? And he went and embraced this woman who had shot his brother dead.

It's a brilliant example of the new humanity that Jesus is calling us into.

It's a great reminder that when it comes to evangelism, Jesus is not wanting us to join a club or pledge allegiance. Jesus is wanting to transform us, to transform you and me and everyone else into a new humanity where we become everything that God made us to be.

And if you go back to the illustration we had of the birds and the cages, Jesus doesn't just smash open the doors and call us out of our cages. Jesus also teaches humanity to really fly.

[32 : 19] The aim of evangelism is to make disciples. If we are trees, we are not standing on our own. We want to be part of a growing forest.

And the fact that we want to be part of that growing forest means that we want to reach out to others. That's how seeds get planted. And all of us, that means that not only is evangelism aiming to make disciples, briefly we also have to say that discipleship is aiming to make evangelists.

So in all the study that we've done over the past few weeks of our discipleship, we must never think that that's just about all about how we grow as individuals. It's also about how we grow as a community of believers as we seek to share the gospel and call people in to our church and into Jesus' new humanity.

And yet often this is the area we struggle with most. Some people are very gifted at sharing their faith and it's a brilliant gift to have. But most of us, and myself included, find it very hard.

And yet the Great Commission is given to us all. We are all to be disciples who are seeking to make other disciples.

[33 : 39] And the question we need to ask is, well, how do we do it? Where do we start? I want to be a better evangelist. I'm sure you all want to be better evangelists as well.

What do we need to do? And I was thinking maybe we need a card for evangelism as well. So we made a card for discipleship, which has these five things.

I was thinking it would be really good to have a card for evangelism as well, wouldn't it? What will we put on it? Well the New Testament teaches various things about evangelism, which we could summarize and put on a card about evangelism.

For example, in 1 Peter 3 we're told that we should be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have. In other words, in sharing the gospel we want to be able to explain the gospel if people have questions.

We won't have all the answers, but we do need to be able to clearly explain the key truths of the gospel. As Jesus says in that great commission, we need to teach others. So that means that our evangelist card should say something like learning and growing together.

[34 : 48] In Matthew 5 Jesus says that we want the world to see our good works and as a result they'll glorify God. And there's many other places in the New Testament where we're told how important it is to serve one another.

That's one of the great evangelistic tools of the church to show kindness, care and generosity to the world around us. We do that because we're not serving ourselves. Together we are serving Jesus, our Lord and King.

So our evangelism card should say something like serving in unity. John 13 Jesus says that the ultimate defining discipleship characteristic is to love one another.

That's how the world is going to recognize us. That's how the world will be attracted to us. No matter how broken someone is, they should know that they can come to us and be loved and cared and protected.

That's an incredibly powerful witness. So our evangelism card should say something like loving and protecting each other. And in Galatians 5 Jesus talks about the fruit of the Spirit.

[35 : 49] Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are the great characteristics that disciples should display.

They're the visible outward fruit that should back up the confession we make with our lips. And if we say we are disciples and if we live out lives that bear fruit to back it up, it's an incredibly powerful witness.

So our evangelism card should say something like bearing fruit for others. And I'm sure you can see what I'm trying to say. The key point is that the things that make us effective disciples will also make us effective evangelists.

Evangelism and discipleship go hand in hand. And when it comes to evangelism over it all is the most important truth of all. The fact that in everything we do as we seek to evangelize and share the gospel, we do it rooted and living in Christ.

That's why Jesus says at the very end of his great commission, I am with you always to the end of the age. Now the word always is literally all the days or every day.

[37 : 08] Jesus is saying I am with you every day. So every day you go to work, every day you try to witness to your colleagues, to your conduct, your attitude, your conversations, every day in school or uni or in your community or in your home.

You are there, whoever you are as a Christian, you are there as an evangelist because you are rooted and living in Christ and he is with you every single day.

And that's a huge encouragement to us because ultimately evangelism is not about us working for Jesus. Evangelism is about Jesus working through us.

Have you ever noticed who the great commission is given to? You might say, well, it's given to disciples and that's obvious but Matthew 28 gives us a bit more detail than that.

Who is the great commission given to? The answer is in verse 17. It's given to doubters.

[38 : 13] These disciples worship Jesus but some doubt it. So Jesus then speaks to them and he says the words that we've been studying this morning.

And for that reason, I'm not actually sure that great commission is the best name for these verses that are on the screen. That's what everyone calls it but I'm going to stick my neck out and say I don't think it's the best name because I think it should actually be called the great reassurance.

Because we are here as weak, nervous, stumbling and often doubting disciples. We long to witness.

We don't know where to start and Jesus says, go and I am with you every day forever.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for these amazing words of your son, our Savior Jesus.

[39 : 18] And we long to be disciples. We long to be evangelists. And we pray that all we've studied over these recent weeks would stay with us.

That we would never forget that we are rooted and living in Jesus. That we would learn and grow together, that we'd serve in unity, that we'd love and protect one another and that we would bear fruit for others.

And we pray, oh God, for any here who maybe aren't yet disciples, please Lord, be at work. Just as you worked in our hearts, please work in their hearts so that even today they will be joy in St. Columbus and joy in heaven over sinners who come to faith in Jesus.

Amen.