

LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP



WHAT IT IS, WHY IT MATTERS, AND
HOW WE DO IT

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LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

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SUGGESTED READING LIST: LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

- ☐ *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Robert Coleman
 - ☐ *Discipling*, Mark Dever
 - ☐ *Multiply*, Francis Chan
 - ☐ *4 Chair Discipling*, Dann Spader
 - ☐ *Insourcing*, Randy Pope
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LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

LESSON ONE THE COMMISSION

HEARING THE WORD

A seasoned soldier was watching new recruits train on the shooting range. He noticed a young man standing at attention at the end of the line and wondered what he was doing. In fact, it soon dawned on him that there was *always* a soldier at attention at the end of the range. He asked a nearby officer what the soldier was doing, and the officer replied, “That is how we have always done it.” It was simple protocol. Still curious, the man did some more research with some humorous results. The soldier standing at attention had been there since the days when officers rode horses. His purpose was to hold the horses’ bridles so they wouldn’t get spooked by the firing. No one rode horses anymore, but no one had bothered to change protocol either, so there a young soldier stands at attention at the end of the firing range, for no purpose whatsoever.¹

Why do we do what we do? When we look at church ministry today, we see many activities and programs, scores of meetings and committees. Do a bit more research as to *why* we have all those activities, programs, meetings, and committees, and you might get the answer, “That’s how we’ve always done it.” But at one time, the church started that activity or program with a particular goal in mind. That goal should be the reason for everything we do (and for everything we *stop* doing). The mission—the target, the goal—is too important for us to neglect in service of nostalgia or inertia. Everything we do should be done for that purpose. So what is the goal? What is our mission as Christians? What is the proverbial center of the target? Jesus tells us in straightforward terms just before he ascends to glory.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

MATTHEW 28:16-20

¹ Brad House tells this story in *Community: Taking Your Small Group off Life Support* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011): 28.

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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What is the Christian's purpose—the goal toward which we must be striving always?

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For the Christian, the center of the target is making disciples. That is the goal that should determine all that we do as a church. Jesus commissioned his disciples to build for his kingdom and glory by training others to repent, believe, worship, and follow him. The principal verb in the Great Commission is “make disciples”—the only verb given in the imperative mood. The other verbs, sometimes translated as imperatives, are in fact participles, giving the activities that accompany the main action. An inelegant, wooden translation might read, “Going, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey.” In other words, Christ told us to do one thing: make disciples. The rest is frosting on the cake, some of what we must do in order to make disciples effectively. For example, in order to make disciples, we must go, whether across the room or across the globe. Baptism seems to get at evangelism, the moment of conversion. And “teaching them to obey” looks more like discipleship proper, the training, education, and edification of a young believer. In any case, the focus is clear: we are told most clearly that we must be in the disciple-making business.

It is so important for us to see that this is our mandate. These are our marching orders from the King of the universe and the Lord of our souls. We cannot shirk our responsibility. We must be found faithful. We cannot claim to be too busy to do this, for God has said that this is what matters most to him. We cannot claim that we are not sufficiently gifted to make disciples, because Jesus promises to go with us, to empower our ministry: “And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (verse 20). And we cannot claim that our ministry has a “different focus” than disciple-making, because Christ asks this of every one of us. We may make disciples in different ways, we may find ourselves especially effective at one or the other end of the spectrum—evangelism or edification—but we all have the same commission. In other words, when it comes to Christ’s call on our lives, we can either make disciples or we can disobey. There is no *via tertia*. I find it hard to believe that we could hear that treasured accolade, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” if—at the end of our lives—we have not done what he asked us to do! This is our commission. This is our calling.

In this study, we want to explore life-on-life missional discipleship. Walking through the commission, the method, the model, and the legacy will equip you to carry on this work of making disciples who make disciples for the rest of your life. As we consider the commission Christ gave us first, let’s ask four key questions.

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

Life-on-life discipleship is what happens when we infuse the Word of God into a genuine relationship for a lengthy period of time. Each of those three ingredients is essential for spiritual transformation to take place. To understand what is lost if we remove any piece, let's use an illustration—making tea. What does it take to make tea? You need the transforming element, tea, much like the Word of God is the transforming element in discipleship. You need a vessel in which to make the tea, a mug, which functions like a relationship. And you need time, exactly like discipleship (only change the minutes to years!).

Take away any element, and you'll get either no tea or very weak tea. In the same way, take away any element from discipleship, and you'll see either no change or very little change.

- Remove the tea leaves, and you'll be left with water in a mug, no matter how long you let it sit there. In the same way, take away the Word of God, and you may have a very nice friendship—but the other person will not become like Christ.
- Remove the mug, and you'll have quite the mess on the counter. Right near the tea bag, you might see some streaks of brown indicating a hint of change, but very little indeed. In the same way, take away the relationship, and you might see some change, but very little. A person who attends church weekly, slipping in and out unnoticed, without ever talking to anyone, might grow a bit closer to Jesus listening to sermons and singing God's praises—but it will be a lot less than someone who invests fully in the life of the church, and let's others invest in him or her.
- Remove the time—just a single dunk of the tea bag—and you'll have dirty water with a hint of tea flavoring. In the same way, without an extended period of time, someone may briefly spur you to a closer relationship with Jesus, but the change will be minimal. (This happens on retreats or at conferences, for example.)

To produce disciples, we must infuse the Word of God into a genuine relationship across an extended period of time. That is discipleship.

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

If we're going to take seriously our commission to make disciples, we must carefully define what a disciple is (and is not). If our definition is wanting, our practice will be wanting too. A factory that sets out to manufacture widgets must have a blueprint before it begins production, or else no one will have any idea if what they've built is what they're supposed to be building or not. The same is true of the church. We are to make disciples. Do we even know what they look like? And if not, how can we evaluate if we're making what God calls us to make!

Jesus himself articulates the key criterion for discipleship: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Interestingly, the opening phrase reads literally, "Whoever wants to follow me." That means, according to Jesus, whoever wants to follow Jesus must *actually follow Jesus!* To be his disciple, to follow him, is to imitate his attitude and actions—to display a self-denying, self-crucifying love of God and others. Needless to say, this comes at a tremendous cost. We die to ourselves (our will and self-determination) so that we can live to God.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus highlights the cost of following him. In Luke 14, Jesus makes a series of strong statements detailing the cost of discipleship:

- “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (verses 26-27).
- “In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (verse 33).
- “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out” (verses 34-35).

Notice how many times Jesus says that if a person will not keep his commands and truly follow him, that person cannot be his disciple. Surely this includes the command to make disciples, for we cannot be his disciples unless we follow him, and he devoted his ministry to making disciples. In fact, part of the Great Commission includes our “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (verse 20)—and that includes teaching them to obey the command to make disciples!

A disciple, then, is a mature and equipped follower of Christ, someone in the process of becoming more like him. At its simplest, a disciple is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. He or she is learning to treasure Christ above all by casting aside idols and sin habits, and following Jesus more and more: a disciple is being “made to magnify.” In addition, he or she is growing in an understanding of the mission God has given to us: to help others follow Jesus too, to make disciples who magnify Christ and are themselves sent out to continue the work: a disciple is being “sent to serve.”

As we grow in grace, we develop both the spiritual *character* and the spiritual *skills* necessary to follow Christ and carry out his commission. Being a mature and equipped disciple of Christ requires much more than mere Bible knowledge or activity in a local church (important though those are). We could define “mature” and “equipped” using the following two acronyms:

Mature	
C	Confession
H	Holiness
A	Adoration
P	Prayer
E	Empowering
L	Love

Equipped	
Discipleship	Helping others become mature and equipped followers of Christ
Outreach	Sharing the gospel winsomely and boldly with our <i>oikos</i>
Gospel	Showing how the gospel addresses all of life's circumstances, including our struggle with sin
Ministry	Developing our spiritual gifts and serving in the church
Abilities	Being a "faithful presence" in our culture according to our vocation
Study	Rightly interpreting God's Word and applying it to life

This is what we strive to see developed in life-on-life discipleship.

WHY SHOULD WE MAKE DISCIPLES?

Another way of asking this question would be, "What makes *this* the center of the target?" Jesus did give other commands, after all. Indeed, in another place, he seems to suggest some other commands should take precedence even:

"The most important [commandment]," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

MARK 12:29-31

Shouldn't the center of the target be *love*—of both God and others? Yes and absolutely. But what does it mean to love God and others? That's the often-unasked question. Love of God manifests in obedience. "If you love me, keep my commands," Jesus says (John 14:15). We love God by obeying his commands, including the command to love others. But we cannot love others without seeking to disciple them.

In our culture today, we have squishy definitions of love. It is often little more than warm fuzzies, social niceties, or passionate emotion. The Bible, however, defines love in stark terms.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 JOHN 4:10-11

To love our neighbor is to do for them what God has done for us. Of course, this does not mean offering our lives as atoning sacrifices for their sin—Christ did that once for all—but it *does* mean laying our lives down for their sakes, for their good. After all, as C.S. Lewis reminds, "Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's

ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.”² So what is the ultimate good that those we’re called to love might know? Jesus leaves us in no doubt:

- “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).
- “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace” (John 16:33).
- “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

Jesus himself—and the life, joy, peace, and love he offers—is the ultimate good we wish for those we love. We make disciples because we love our neighbors enough to labor that they might know this ultimate good, the riches of grace in Christ Jesus.

And yet, many of us *don’t* actually labor that they might know this good. Why not?

WHAT’S STOPPING US?

This is an issue of priorities ultimately. The plain fact of the matter is that there are many activities in life worth doing—and not time to do them all. We must see that there is great danger here. If we are not careful, we could spend our whole lives doing what amounts to an eternal waste of time. We could miss the boat altogether. As many wise people have said before, the enemy of the best is not the worst but the good. The enemy will happily have us play at lesser games—participating in mere activities, rather than doing the real work of life-on-life missional discipleship—for he knows he will have neutralized us without our ever realizing it. And that would be a great victory for him.

What are your priorities, really? Keep in mind, this is not a list you jot down in your prayer journal. It is far too easy to deceive ourselves doing that. We know our true priorities by what happens when there is conflict. Do you skip church or skip your child’s baseball tournament? Do you watch the season finale or attend the weekly prayer gathering? And, more to our point this lesson, *where does life-on-life discipleship rank in terms of your priorities?*

Please note, this is not now, and never will be, an issue of time. We all have the same amount of time, and some devote themselves to making disciples with great zeal. The issue is *desire*. You will always find time to do what you truly desire to do. If you don’t have time to make disciples, that is because making disciples—the commission Christ gave us—is too far down your list of desires. And that is a terrifying thought, because it means you do not love others enough to do what matters most for them, and do not love God enough to keep his command to make disciples!

In the next few lessons, we will look at what we should be doing—the method and model of making disciples. But for now, we might need to look at what we should *stop* doing. We all of us have long enough To Do Lists. What most of us need is a Stop Doing List. What will you do with the activities keeping you from carrying out Christ’s commission?

If you’re not making disciples—if you’re not sharing the love of God with the lost, training up less mature believers to know him more intimately—you are saying with your life that you do not really believe in Jesus. You are saying he is not the Way, the Truth, and the Life for their lives—and you are implicitly saying you are not so sure he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life for your life either, otherwise you would be fully committed to keeping his commands. You are saying

² *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970): 49.

that the activities and people higher up on your priority list are more likely to bring you and others life, love, joy, and peace than Christ.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe God himself is the ultimate good you would wish for those you are called to love? Then go and make disciples—because we can either do that, or we can disobey.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Mark 8:27-38
- ☐ Luke 14:25-35
- ☐ John 1:35-51
- ☐ John 20:19-23

DOING THE WORD

The trouble with lessons like these is that we may easily succumb to self-delusion. I find this is especially true when it comes to a discussion of our priorities. Who among us would not say God is our first priority? that we are eagerly seeking to do as he wills? And yet the proof of the pudding is in the eating—and in this case, the pudding is our schedules. Take some time to think through what you truly prioritize, what you have made the center of your target (unwittingly or not).

Have you counted the cost of following Jesus? That is, are you denying yourself in sacrificial ways as you follow Jesus?

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Are you doing what is best, or what is merely good? By what criteria will you make this judgment?

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Pay attention to what consumes your time this Lesson (work, family, church, leisure, etc.). What activities need to be on your Stop Doing List? How will you extricate yourself from them graciously? Who will hold you accountable to make these changes?

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If you are a parent with children still living at home, are you a disciple-making parent or merely a “Christian” parent? What do you need to do differently to engage in intentional, life-on-life discipleship with your children?

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LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

LESSON TWO THE METHOD

HEARING THE WORD

In the last lesson, we studied the mission Christ has given us, but this raises another series of questions. If all that matters is getting people to live out the gospel, how do we go about it? What concrete, practical steps can we take to make this a reality in our lives? Here we turn to the example of Christ for our method.

Why did Christ come to earth? Most importantly, of course, he came to glorify the Father by redeeming a people for his name. But he also came to establish his eternal kingdom through the church. So then, how does Christ establish the church? Now this is where it gets interesting. If I were Jesus, I would have thought that breadth would be best. The more people committed to my cause, the better. But Christ takes the opposite approach, as we'll see in our passage this week.

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons. ¹⁶ These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), ¹⁷ James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder"), ¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

MARK 3:13-18

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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From what we see in this brief passage, what was Christ's method for reaching the world and building his church?

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Instead of choosing breadth, trying to reach as many as possible with the message of the kingdom, Christ chooses depth. Rather than trying to convert thousands of followers, he devoted his time and energy to a few committed followers who could not fail him. Jesus Christ gambled the future of the church on twelve men, one of whom he chose specifically to betray him. And we are the result of that gamble! One suspects that he knew what he was doing. What was his secret? As Robert Coleman noted long ago, men were his method.¹ As we see in this passage, before he evangelized anyone, before he preached his first public sermon, he called a few men to himself. There is infinite wisdom here. Real change rarely happens except in the context of deep, personal relationships, whether one-on-one or small group. If we want to make disciples—to fulfill our commission, to hit the target—we must take the time to build into a few people at a time.

Now we must get very practical so that we understand *how* to go about it. Here are four simple steps (simple to understand, but time- and energy-consuming to practice!) that Christ demonstrates for us as we strive to carry out his commission.

STEP ONE: CHOOSE THEM

Notice what happens first in our passage. Jesus heads up a mountainside, almost certainly to pray, seeking the Father's will as to whom he should call to follow him. Jesus' first step in making disciples is selecting them. He "appointed twelve" (verse 14), and lest we be in any doubt about what that meant, Mark lists the twelve for us. He appointed these twelve to "be with him" in a different, more focused way than the others who followed him. (We know from Acts 1:21-23 that others followed Jesus from the beginning too.) And he not only set apart these twelve men, but selected three from

¹ *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 30th anniv. ed. (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993): 27. I have simplified Coleman's eight steps in this lesson.

among them—Peter, James, and John—to form an even tighter inner circle. Jesus looked at the crowds, but only chose a handful of men to disciple.

It sounds hard when you say it, but the plain fact of the matter is that we cannot possibly disciple everyone we know who needs it. At most, given our other commitments, we might be able to work with a handful of people each year. So care must be taken to select the best candidates for discipleship. You must identify those people in your life who are (1) faithful to God and his Word, (2) available to meet with you, and (3) teachable, willing to learn from you, and then invite them into the discipleship relationship. Notice that “qualified” (intelligent, charismatic, well-spoken, etc.) does not make the list of important characteristics, as God rarely chooses those “qualified” by the world’s standards to perform his duties. (One thinks of Moses and Peter, for example.) Rather, he chooses men and women of faith and devotion whom he can shape into the people he needs them to be. Jesus selected twelve men from the crowds—ordinary fishermen, tax collectors, rural businessmen. But he saw in them the qualities he knew they would need to complete his mission. We must do likewise.

STEP TWO: LOVE THEM

Per the Master’s example, the next step is spending time with the future candidates. Notice again that Jesus appointed these men simply to “be with him” (verse 14). Much of discipleship and training takes place not in formal sessions—Bible classes, Sunday sermons, or the like—but in the daily grind: seeing how to respond in difficult circumstances, watching a leader with his wife and children, grabbing a bite to eat together. The man who disciplined me as a teenager knew this step well. We ate dinner together no fewer than twice weekly throughout my junior and senior years in high school. It was during this time that I saw his faith and how he lived it out. I learned much more during those times than I did when we would study a devotional together. How much do you think the disciples learned simply watching Jesus speaking to the lepers, the woman at the well, the Pharisees? An eternity’s worth of truth, I am sure.

This time together also cements the relationship—without which no real discipleship is possible. No doubt you have heard the old saying, “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” That is the truth. This step provides you with the opportunity to prove to your disciple how much you care for him or her, to establish a firm foundation on which to build the rest of the discipleship relationship. I am certain that I would not have been able to speak about God to many of the boys I disciplined in my years on the mission field in Colombia, if I had not first taken the time to play soccer with them every day at lunch. Get out and spend time with your disciples. Take them out for ice cream. Go bowling. It doesn’t matter what you do. Just spend time together, develop a solid, biblical friendship, and then show them that you love them.

STEP THREE: TRAIN THEM

Although we don’t see it in our passage this week, we know that Jesus called these men to himself in order to train them. Within just a few chapters, we read, “Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits” (Mark 6:7). He spends focused time with his disciples, investing in their lives, so that he can then send them out to continue his work.

We all need guidance as we journey towards Christian maturity, and God has graciously provided the fellowship of believers to meet this need. Asking penetrating questions of your disciples, you will soon learn where they need support and encouragement. Many will need direction and accountability in the spiritual disciplines, especially prayer and study. Others will face difficult decisions, complicated relationships, besetting sins that require care and wisdom to address.

Though hardly adequate for the task, God can and will use us—by his grace—to be instruments of grace in the lives of others, when we yield ourselves to his service.

Also, at this point we have moved into the stages of discipleship that will begin to prepare the disciple for future ministry—whether vocational or not. After all, our goal must always be to make disciples who make disciples. Part of training is demonstrating how to do discipleship. By discipling our disciples, we show them how discipleship works—the questions you ask, the concern you show, the importance of prayer and spending time together. Or consider our present context: by watching your Journey Group leader lead across three years, you will learn how to lead your own Journey Group (which is the goal). In being disciplined, one learns how to make disciples. (Of course, if you are trying to train your disciple in a particular aspect of ministry—leading worship, perhaps, or teaching Sunday school—you will want to work specifically in those areas.)

Then, once your disciple has started to see how the work is done, the next step is allowing him or her some freedom to do it, to practice. After the disciples had been with Christ for a period of time, he sent them out to preach among the towns of Israel. He delegated his task of preaching to them, knowing that one day they would take it over completely. Of course, part of training them to go out involves supervision when they begin to do ministry, to make disciples. After the Twelve returned from their mission, they met with Christ to discuss what they learned (see Luke 9:1-10 and 10:1-20, especially verses 17 and 20).

You have heard the saying, “Practice makes perfect.” But really, that’s not true. The saying should be, “Practice makes permanent.” If you continue to practice the wrong way, you will never get any better. About the worst thing a teacher can do for a student is to give little or no feedback. Imagine, after giving a test, that a teacher simply handed back the grades to his or her students without having shown them where they lost points. How would they ever learn what they needed to fix? However, practice *with feedback* will certainly get you a lot closer to perfection. This is where real learning takes place. Your disciple should be given the opportunity to practice discipleship in a safe, controlled environment, where he or she knows help is nearby. (Your Journey Group leader, for example, may ask one of you to lead a section or lesson in preparation for leading a group in the future.) Everyone makes mistakes; this is the time to do it, knowing that growth will take place as a result.

STEP FOUR: SEND THEM

Jesus appoints the twelve to be with him, as we have seen, but also “that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (verses 14-15), which we saw him do in Mark 6:7. And, as we saw last week, their training culminates in the Great Commission, when Jesus sends them (and us) out in the power of the Spirit to carry on his work until he comes again.

Thus, once we have taken our disciples through the first three steps, we should be ready to send our disciples out into the world to make disciples of their own. Our goal should never be just to “make disciples,” but to “make disciples *who make disciples*.” We know that Christ knew this goal well, and we are all living proof that he sent his disciples out to make new disciples. This is how the church has always grown, and this is how the church will continue to grow. Nothing will warm your heart so much as seeing your disciples catch fire for God and be unable to contain it any longer. If you build into them, and teach them to build into others, you will soon see fruit in an exponentially increasing number of lives. At this point, you release your disciples into the world to fulfill their mandate from heaven.

Before we close, we must pause and remind ourselves that Christ's approach to ministry *works*. He did not show us the third- or fourth- or sixteenth-best way to make disciples. As the all-knowing, all-wise God of the universe, he showed us the best—the only—way: life-on-life missional discipleship. Just a short while after his disciples begin their own ministry, we have confirmation that Jesus did what he intended to do: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men *had been with Jesus*" (Acts 4:13). Do you see? The church's early opponents immediately recognized that these men had been with Jesus, which is what he had called them to do (verse 14)! Because they had been with him, they became like him. They were ready to be sent out to serve the world Christ came to save.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Matthew 4:18-22
- ☐ Matthew 9:9-13
- ☐ Luke 9:1-10
- ☐ Acts 4:13-22

DOING THE WORD

Consider your own spiritual formation, especially the times when you have grown rapidly. Can you identify any “triggers” for growth—that is, instruments of grace that God has used consistently in your life to draw you into deeper fellowship with him? For most people, that trigger is a person (or perhaps a succession of people) who has taken the time to build into us patiently and individually—what we might call life-on-life discipleship. Even though most identify relational discipleship as the primary catalyst for growth, it never seems to result in a lifestyle choice. Just think, the riches of grace lie waiting for us, we have probably even identified the means of attaining them, and yet, most of us are shockingly neglectful of those means! Keep that in mind as you answer the next few questions.

Would you include life-on-life discipleship as one of the key catalysts in your own spiritual formation? Why or why not?

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Given how important life-on-life discipleship seems to be in the lives of Christians, including the earliest disciples, how important do you want it to be in your life? What will need to change to make that true of you?

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Think through the people in your life. What faithful, available, and teachable Christians do you see? How could you build into their lives—loving them, investing in them—in the next few weeks and months?

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Discipleship is “caught” more than “taught,” the old saying goes. Because you will need to be “with” someone to do life-on-life discipleship, letting them see how you follow Christ in daily life, what areas of your life (prayer? Bible study? evangelism? a particular sin issue?) will require a greater level of obedience if you are to be effective in your disciple-making? (Parents, this is a particularly good question to ask yourself as you think of your kids too.)

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LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

LESSON THREE THE MODEL

HEARING THE WORD

Kingdom growth happens one by one from the inside out. That is a hard but necessary lesson for us to learn. There are no shortcuts; indeed, the shortcuts we have attempted have failed spectacularly. We prefer mass recruitment—big crowds at big events—to the slow, energy-intensive process of making mature and equipped disciples of Christ. We have created programs to do what can only be done by people in the power of the Spirit. What we need to see happen in our own lives and the lives of those around us cannot be done by *something*—a class, a study, a program—but by *someone*. Kingdom growth happens one by one from the inside out: a person at a time, life on life, working from the heart to the will, from beliefs to actions.

This is very much the example of Paul, who holds himself up as a model to be followed. In this lesson, we will look at a self-portrait of his disciple-making ministry in Thessalonica, paying particular attention to what life-on-life discipleship requires in order for it to be effective.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,⁸ so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:7b-12

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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How would you characterize Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians? What does he model for us that we would do well to emulate?

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In describing his ministry, Paul highlights four pairs of requirements for an effective disciple-making ministry. Let's consider one pair at a time as we walk through the passage.

TIME AND AFFECTION (2:7b-8)

Paul opens this paragraph by comparing his ministry to that of a nursing mother. The main point of comparison is the requisite selflessness. A nursing mother devotes herself to her baby's well-being. She loses sleep in order to nourish the growing child. No one doubts that a nursing mother actively demonstrates her love for her newborn. She daily, even momentarily, displays tender affection, selfless love, and abundant attention. And this, Paul says, is the same mindset we should bring to our disciple-making. We willingly devote our time to making disciples because we love the people God has placed in our lives with the same affection a mother has for her child.

Paul uses intensely affectionate language here. We could translate the phrase, "Because we loved you" more literally as, "Because we were eagerly desirous for you." This desire—to see our disciples experience the ultimate good—creates delight even in our self-giving. Love is the atmosphere in which discipleship transpires, in other words. Notice that Paul delights to share with them not just the gospel (the content of ministry), but his very life. The word he uses for "life" connotes the whole of his being: personality, will, emotion, and *concern*. He expounds on this concern elsewhere: "Besides everything else [including persecution and hardship], I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). Paul regards the emotional burden of earnestly desiring his disciples' growth in Christ as more taxing than all the physical hardships he endures. That is what he is willing to give—much like a nursing mother. The Thessalonians are objects of God's love, and therefore objects of his love. Love is the heart, the atmosphere, the *sine qua non* of disciple-making. Life-on-life discipleship requires time and affection.

ENERGY AND SACRIFICE (2:9)

Next, Paul emphasizes the personal sacrifices he makes in order to carry on his ministry, including a significant outpouring of time and energy. He describes his work as "toil and hardship," which he carried on "night and day" so that he wouldn't be a burden to anyone. That phrase "night and day" reminds us that a huge part of the sacrifice we must make is *time*. We have to admit that there is no such thing as "spare time," which means we can't wait for spare time to make disciples! Instead, this will involve "pricey" time, time you could be spending on other (good and enjoyable) activities.

One of the realities of Paul's ministry is that he had to work to support himself most of the time, so that he wouldn't be a financial burden to those he was serving. This was part of his sacrifice. He gave his life away for nothing—no personal gain. Interestingly, this means that most of his ministry would have happened in his workshop. As a leather-worker, he would be evangelizing or teaching as he repaired clothes and made tents. He couldn't participate in street preaching or other public gatherings except when he received a financial gift that made it possible for a time. Of necessity, his work would often have been with individuals and small groups in his workshop. That model should compel us to think about how we make disciples where we spend most of our time—in our vocations. What does it look like to make disciples as an educator, a salesperson, a scientist, a medical professional, a stay-at-home parent? This is the question we must each answer for our specific context.

Notice what should be obvious but always bears repeating: Paul does not offer morality lessons, but the gospel of God. That is what people need to hear (believers and unbelievers). We proclaim Christ and him crucified, and all the riches of grace—love, joy, peace, life—for those who believe. But to do so requires *energy*, toilsome labor night and day, and *sacrifice*, for we do all this for the sake of another.

INTEGRITY AND WITNESS (2:10)

Paul affirms his integrity in the strongest possible terms in this verse. Importantly, he opens by pointing out that the Thessalonians *witnessed* his godly life. He is not claiming what he hasn't already proven during his time with them. He doesn't need to convince them of his character, because they have witnessed it firsthand. Indeed, Paul goes so far as to say that he could even call on God to testify on his behalf. Everyone has seen firsthand his holy, righteous, and blameless life. The repetition of virtual synonyms emphasizes how firmly he and his ministry partners held themselves above reproach throughout their time in Thessalonica.

At this point, you must ask if you could say the same to those you would seek to disciple—including your kids, if you're a parent. You cannot give what you do not have, and so you cannot hope to impart godliness if you don't possess it (imperfectly but in increasing measure). Think of how important it will be to live well before your disciples. What good will a detailed study of anger do, if you curse the guy who cuts you off in traffic on the way home—with your disciple in the passenger seat! How can we implore our disciples to devote themselves to God's Word, if we can't answer even basic questions about the Bible when they ask because we've neglected our study? As Paul says elsewhere, in one of the most difficult passages for us to repeat, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). We would not want people to follow us unless they are witnessing us zealously following Christ.

This is a good reminder that we must *be* disciples before we can *make* disciples. We must take the necessary time to examine ourselves—putting sin to death and pursuing holiness—before we seek to make disciples. Life-on-life discipleship requires *integrity*—a holy, righteous, blameless life—and a willingness to have other *witness* it.

DISCIPLINE AND INSTRUCTION (2:11-12)

Once again, Paul can assume that his readers were eyewitnesses of his godly ministry. "For you know," he begins, because he knows *they* know how he served among them. Notice that he and his partners ministered to the Thessalonians as individuals, and not merely as a group: "we dealt with *each* of you." We make disciples one by one from the inside out. That is what we mean by *life-on-life* discipleship. While it might seem more productive to minister to large groups, so that we "multiply the time," so to speak, in the end it proves less fruitful because the seed doesn't take root—a point to which we'll return in the next lesson.

And how did Paul deal with each one? “As a father deals with his children.” Thus, Paul not only loves and nurtures his disciples like a nursing mother, but exhorts and instructs them like a father. He encourages them, urging them to live lives worthy of the calling they have received, declaring what they can (and must) be in Christ. This includes speaking hard truths that function like a spur to keep us running the race faithfully. A Jesuit priest described how the founder of the order, Ignatius Loyola, encouraged his disciples in similar and instructive terms: “To those who were still children in virtue Ignatius gave milk; but to those who were more advanced, bread with the crust; while he treated the perfect more rigorously still, in order to make them run at full speed towards perfection.”¹ That is what Paul has done, offering milk as a nursing mother to those who need it, and rigorous instruction to those ready to run at full speed towards the life God has called them to live.

And, as we would expect, Paul concludes the self-portrait of his disciple-making ministry with the gospel—the God who “calls you into his kingdom and glory” (verse 12). We must never forget that all our work is rooted in and based on God’s work. He continually calls us into his kingdom (the present experience of his work) and glory (the certain hope we have of that work coming to fruition). Like children need a father, life-on-life discipleship requires *discipline* and *instruction*.

Time and affection, energy and sacrifice, integrity and witness, and discipline and instruction—*that* is what it takes to make disciples who make disciples, to see the kingdom grow one by one from the inside out.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ 1 Corinthians 11:1
- ☐ 2 Corinthians 11:16-33
- ☐ 2 Timothy 3:10-13
- ☐ John 15:1-8

¹ As quoted in Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola, 2003): 178.

DOING THE WORD

Take some time to reflect on the “requirements” of life-on-life discipleship: time and affection, energy and sacrifice, integrity and witness, and discipline and instruction. This isn’t easy, but it is worth doing. It is part of denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following Jesus. And it is how God will build his kingdom.

Which of the “requirements” of life-on-life discipleship is most difficult for you? Which is easiest? Why do you think this is?

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Have you adjusted your schedule since the first week to create more time for disciple-making? What other activities have won your affection? Where does life-on-life discipleship rank in terms of your desires?

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What activities in your life take up the bulk of your energy? What sacrifices might you have to make in order to be an effective disciple-maker?

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What areas of your character need to be strengthened in order to make disciples effectively? Can you say with Paul, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”?

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Are you willing to speak hard truths in love when necessary? If not, why not? In what ways can you encourage a less mature Christian to believe in gospel truths?

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LIFE-ON-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

LESSON FOUR **THE LEGACY**

HEARING THE WORD

Because we live in a digital age, we understand the notion of “viral growth.” Someone takes a video of a cat and dog hugging, uploads it to the internet, and then shares it on any number of social media sites. Because of the unbearable cuteness of these two furry friends, her online acquaintances begin not just liking the video, but sharing it as well. In fact, the video is so irresistibly adorable that other people—those who wouldn’t know the original poster from Adam—begin sharing it too. Before long, it is #Trending, and the late-night TV hosts have picked it up. The video has “gone viral.”

What has this to do with disciple-making? I would submit that “viral growth” is precisely the strategy Christ has given us for reaching the world. It involves far fewer stadiums filled with crowds listening to a famous evangelist (not that there’s anything wrong with that), and far more one-on-one or one-on-few conversations in living rooms and coffee shops and beyond. It is the strategy Paul lays out in some of his last words to his most famous disciple, Timothy.

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

2 TIMOTHY 2:1-2

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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How would the instruction Paul gives Timothy lead to viral growth in evangelism and discipleship? What are the practical implications for ministry today?

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Life-on-life discipleship is not a cul-de-sac but an on-ramp to ongoing ministry. It does not end with your disciple, but ought to continue for generations upon generations. In the passage for this lesson, Paul explicitly mentions four generations:

PAUL → TIMOTHY (AND WITNESSES) → RELIABLE PEOPLE → OTHERS

And even then, the process should continue long after those four generations pass away. For Paul tells Timothy to entrust his teaching to those who will faithfully instruct others, and surely that includes the teaching to entrust his teaching to those who will faithfully instruct others!

Thus, Paul is teaching his young pupil the principle of *multiplication*—a principle he learned from his Master. Jesus, let's remember, chose a handful of disciples, poured his life and teaching into them, and then sent them out to make disciples, teaching them to obey all his commands—including the command to make disciples. The Master's plan for world evangelism and discipleship is to multiply disciples one by one from the inside out. That is the plan Paul then teaches Timothy. That is the legacy we hope to leave: ongoing, generational multiplication. As we consider this legacy, let's examine multiplication's purpose, power, and proof.

THE PURPOSE

One of the consistent themes of this unit has been the need to evaluate what we're producing. Many churches would name disciple-making as their mandate, but are we truly producing disciples—mature and equipped followers of Christ? We have now added another dimension to our evaluation: are the disciples we've made themselves engaged in disciple-making? Are we making disciples who make disciples who make disciples . . . until the end of time?

We must carefully define *what* we intend to multiply, in other words. Paul gives us the answer in our passage. We must strive, by God's grace, to multiply "reliable people" who will be faithful to teach others. That must also be the standard by which we evaluate our ministry—as churches and individuals. As Robert Coleman elucidates,

Here finally is where we must all evaluate the contribution that our life and witness is making to the supreme purpose of him who is the Savior of the world. Are those who have followed us to Christ now leading others to him and teaching them to make disciples like ourselves? Note, it is not enough to rescue the perishing, though this is imperative; nor is it sufficient to build up newborn babes in the faith of Christ, although this, too, is necessary if the firstfruit is to endure; in fact, it is not sufficient just to get them out winning souls, as commendable as this work may be. *What really counts in the ultimate perpetuation of our work is the faithfulness with which our converts go and make leaders out of their converts*, not simply

more followers. Surely we want to win our generation for Christ, and to do it now, but this is not enough. Our work is never finished until it has assured its continuation in the lives of those redeemed by the [gospel].

The test of any work of evangelism thus is not what is seen at the moment, or in the conference report, but in the effectiveness with which the work continues in the next generation.¹

Following Paul's instruction to Timothy, we might revise Coleman's quote slightly: the test is in the effectiveness with which the work continues in the *fourth* generation. I have seen firsthand how encouraging this can be. The man who discipled me when I was in high school retired a few years ago, and I was privileged to be able to speak at his retirement concert (he was a music teacher). I shared with him that I had passed what he taught me, especially the importance of life-on-life discipleship, onto my students while I was serving as a chaplain on the mission field in Colombia. One of my students—who had been a part of our discipleship team, and was thus trained in all the ideas from this unit—now serves on the mission field, making disciples in the Middle East. That is the fourth generation. May it multiply across a thousand more generations!

THE POWER

That story illustrates the power of multiplication in a small way, but it is worth exploring further. In truth, we may see Christ's strategy for reaching the world as counterproductive. After all, he spent most of his time with twelve men, one of whom he chose specifically to betray him, and the rest men with significant shortcomings, as evidenced by a cursory reading of the Gospels. Why didn't he evangelize more? Why didn't he preach to the crowds more? Why spend so much time with so few? Those questions, which we have all asked, point to the difference between addition and multiplication.

You have likely heard various illustrations of the power of multiplication, but I want to share some of my favorites still, because they are endlessly fascinating—and teach such an important spiritual lesson.

- A piece of paper is 1/1000 of an inch thick. If you were to tear it in half and then stack the halves, the stack would be 2/1000 of an inch thick. Do it again, and now it's 4/1000 of an inch thick. You will have to tear it ten times before the stack gets over an inch—just barely, at 1.024 inches. But keep tearing and stacking until you've done it 50 times (which will be physically impossible, of course), and your stack will be approximately 17 million miles high—enough for 34 round trips from the earth to the moon!
- Get out your checkers board with its 64 squares. Put one grain of wheat on the first square, then two on the second, four on the third—and keep doubling the grains with each new square. By the time you get to the 64th square, you will have enough wheat to cover the nation of India—to a depth of 50 feet!

What does this have to do with disciple-making—and especially the difference between addition and multiplication? To see, let's play make believe for a moment. Let us suppose we compare the World's Greatest Evangelist with a Very Average Disciple-Maker. Our evangelist sees one thousand people come to Christ *every single day*! At the end of one year, he has seen 365,000 conversions. By year 10, more than 3 million. By year 40, an astonishing 14,600,000! That

¹ *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 30th anniv. ed. (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993): 94-95. (Emphasis added.)

is the power of addition. And we would praise God for each of those more than 14 million men and women who have come to know Christ.

Our disciple-maker, on the other hand, is a bit slower. Quite a bit slower, in fact. As the pastor of a small church, he trains three leaders to lead Journey Groups alongside him, so that at the end of the first year, he has three mature and equipped disciple-makers at work alongside him. The now four leaders select faithful, available, and teachable people to join their Journey Groups, and at the end of the year they are ready to multiply out another six new leaders, for a total of nine. The pattern continues, so that in the third year they send out 27 leaders. Impressive, yes, but hardly keeping pace with our evangelist, who is over a million at the end of three years.

At the end of ten years, the gap has narrowed a bit. Our evangelist has seen 3.65 million conversions, and our disciple-maker has sent out 59,049 disciple-makers. But then the numbers start to change. In year fifteen, our disciple-maker finally passes the evangelist, having sent out more than 14 million disciple-makers, whereas the evangelist has about 5.5 million converts. At his retirement after 40 years, remember that our evangelist has witnessed an incredible 14.5 million conversions. But what about our disciple-maker, who also retires after 40 years of making disciples who make disciples? He has done pretty well too, multiplying out 12,157,665,459,056,928,768 disciple-makers! (That's more than 12 quintrillion, if you're keeping track at home.)

That is the power of multiplication. It is a counterintuitive strategy, undoubtedly. We want to take the shortcut, to reach the multitudes instantly with our big events and large crowds. But if we take seriously the example set by Jesus and Paul, we will patiently build into a few at first—so that, in the end, the few can reach the many, and the many can reach the multitudes, and the multitudes can reach the whole world for Christ. We think big—wanting everyone to know Christ—but start small and go deep. We take the time to see mature and equipped disciples formed before deploying them to do the same in the lives of others, multiplied until the end of time.

THE PROOF

This is exactly what Paul has done. He builds into Timothy and the other witnesses—men like Luke, Tychicus and Trophimus—then sends them out to build into reliable people, who will then be sent out to build into others.

The results speak for themselves. We are proof that multiplication happens. Let's not forget that we could draw a straight line from us to Jesus. Someone told us about Jesus and taught us the faith. That person learned from someone who learned from someone who learned from someone . . . who learned from Paul or one of the apostles, who learned from Jesus.

We can see the proof in the immediate results of Paul's ministry as well. In Acts 20:4, we read that Paul took a group of young men with him as he traveled back through Macedonia. It seems these were disciples that he had picked up on one of his missionary journeys. The list itself isn't all that interesting—but what *is* interesting is where else we see those names. Here is Acts 20:4 with all of the other references to those individuals inserted in brackets:

He was accompanied by Sopater [Romans 16:21] son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus [Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24] and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius [Romans 16:23] from Derbe, Timothy also [1 and 2 Timothy, among others], and Tychicus [Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12] and Trophimus [2 Timothy 4:20] from the province of Asia.

Do you see what has happened? Paul chose a handful of men from all these different cities, loved them, trained them, even took them along with him on his travels—and then sent them out into the world as the next generation of leaders. We see them serving in Ephesus, Colosse, Miletus, and all throughout the province of Asia. What a legacy! To quote Robert Coleman again,

That is why we must say with E.M. Bounds that “men are God’s method.” Until we have such people imbued with his Spirit and committed to his plan, none of our methods will work.

This is the new evangelism we need. It is not better methods, but better men and women who know their Redeemer from personal experience—men and women who see his vision and feel his passion for the world—men and women who are willing to be nothing so that he might be everything—men and women who want only for Christ to produce his life in and through them according to his own good pleasure. This finally is the way the Master planned for his objective to be realized on the earth, and where it is carried through by his strategy, the gates of hell cannot prevail against the evangelization of the world.²

May that be the legacy we leave. Amen!

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Acts 20:1-6
- ☐ 2 Timothy 2:3-13
- ☐ Colossians 1:24-29
- ☐ John 12:20-26

² Ibid., 97.

DOING THE WORD

As we wrap up this study, think through the legacy you want to leave. These are powerful truths, and they warrant thoughtful reflection so that we can see them come to fruition in and through us, by God’s grace.

How have you engaged in the good work of making disciples previously? What has been the result—that is, are those people now making disciples? If not, what needs to change?

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What legacy do you want to leave at the end of your life? (Be specific.) What do you need to start doing (or stop doing) to see that become reality?

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