

Three Understandings of Discipleship

by Eric Foley

The sermon emphasizes the importance of comprehensive discipleship in the church, focusing on individual growth in Christ and building up the body of Christ through equipping people for works of service.

Duration: 33:18

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 7:24-27, Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27, John 14:15, Romans 13:10

Topics: "Discipleship"

Description

In this sermon, Pastor Foley emphasizes the importance of both hearing and doing the word of God. He references Matthew 7:24-27, where Jesus teaches that those who hear and do His words are like wise builders who build their house on a solid foundation, while those who only hear but do not practice His words are like foolish builders who build on sand. Pastor Foley encourages the listeners to study and memorize this scripture and to implement a comprehensive discipleship strategy to grow in Christ. He also highlights the need for a system of discipleship rooted in the Holy Spirit and guided by the love and grace of God.

Transcript

He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him over for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things? For more information on .wevangelicalchurch, go to ericfoley.com. And now here's the Reverend Eric Foley on .wfm radio for the Underground Church in the West. It is week one of our discipleship training for the year, new year, and so we begin this month to study preparation and I'm here today not only as a teacher but as your servant. My job is to be your brother in Christ who cares passionately for your growth to fullness in Christ and for your ministry to the people who are in your sphere of influence.

And because of this I want to take the time in this first week of our year-long discipleship training meetings to talk about the kind of discipleship that leads to full maturity in Christ. This kind of discipleship unfortunately is overlooked many times in the church today and yet it's one of the most important responsibilities of the church. We Christians and churches don't spend anywhere near enough time in this area and unfortunately we don't have a plan for discipleship.

We just hope it happens. We hope if you come to the church enough and get people to do enough and they go to enough classes that somehow they'll grow to full maturity in Christ. And in some cases unfortunately there are even churches and Christians that don't believe it's possible to see Christians grow

to full maturity in Christ.

So unfortunately most of the church's focus ends up being about growing the church numerically. We're always trying to get new folks to come in instead of helping people to grow to fullness in Christ and so what we lack in maturity we hope to make up in numbers. We have a lot of people that are not mature but the more of them we get in the better we feel about it.

But in the Bible the focus is not on that kind of growth at all. Instead the focus is on each individual Christian growing to full maturity in Christ. And so as we kick off our year together we're starting by looking at some of the scriptures that emphasize and underscore the need for all Christians to be a part of a comprehensive discipleship strategy that is designed to help them grow to fullness in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

An intentional comprehensive process. So I want you to begin by taking a look with me at Ephesians chapter 4 verses 11 through 13. Ephesians chapter 4 verses 11 through 13.

This is the apostle Paul as he talks about the need for this kind of a process. This is what he says. Ephesians 4 11 through 13.

So Christ gave himself the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and teachers. You notice he lists all of the leadership positions in the church. Why did he give these positions? Verse 12, to equip his people for works of service.

Remember our church here is structured around works of service. Why? Because this is the way Paul lays it out. The job of the church leader is to equip the people for works of service.

Why? So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature. So notice that the word all applies to every individual Christian. So the purpose of the leader is to walk people through those works of mercy, those ways that we show God's love out in the world because we first received it ourselves.

And we're going to do this process so that all of us, every one of us, are going to grow to in Christ, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of God. So that's pretty spectacular. It ought to be common in the church, but unfortunately it is a little rare and that's our job to try to change that.

You can see in verse 11 that the scripture defines our role and by our role, I'm saying all of us who are here, the role of the pastor, the role of the teacher, the role of the missionary, and all of us are in one of those roles. You may not formally be in a role yet of pastoring, although that's what you're kind of being geared to do in this process, but you're already in that role of teaching your own children, of being the senior Christian in many cases in your sphere of influence. And so there you are serving the body of Christ and if you were a teacher or a pastor in a secularized kind of an environment, you would be up above everyone and they would be below you, right? You would be the person in the know and they would be the people who are there soaking it all in.

But because we are Christian, I am here as your servant and I am training you to be a servant to the other people in your sphere of influence as you become a teacher. That's the mark of being a Christian teacher is serving the people who God has placed around us, equipping them for works of service by serving them. So I am here to support you to help you grow.

Now that's a very important point. I'm not here to help you achieve what you think you want to achieve, right? That's something that I want you to pay careful attention to is we're not just here to answer everybody's questions. We're not here to help them with all of the problems they're facing in life.

I am here to support to help you to grow to fullness in Christ as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4-5, we are your servants for Christ's sake. So I'm not your servant for your sake. I am your servant for Christ's sake and so that means I'm here to do for you not what you want me to do for you but what Christ has called me to do for you and that's going to set boundaries for me with you.

It's going to set boundaries for you with other people. You're not just here to do what anybody asks you to do. You're here to do what Christ asks you to do for other people and so you're called to serve them in that way.

What did Christ ask you to do? You'll see that in Ephesians 4-12. What Christ is asking you to do, your purpose as a servant for Christ's sake is to build up the body of Christ. That's what you're called to do.

You're not called to be nice to people. You're not called to do anything that people want you to do in an effort to prove that you're the greatest servant of all time. You're not other servants.

You are other servants for Christ's sake and that last part is very important. So never forget that when people ask you to do things. It is not the job of the Christian to say yes to whatever anybody wants you to do.

It is the job of the Christian to be servants for Christ's sake and there is a world of difference between those two perspectives and we are not your servants for the sake of the church. Unfortunately, we often misunderstand that phrase build up the body in Ephesians 4-12. We misunderstand that to say make the church as large as possible but that's not what Paul has in mind.

We can see in verse 13 that the building up of the body that the apostle Paul is referring to is not primarily about size but about maturity. The success of the church is always measured by our ability to disciple people individually and grow them into full maturity in Christ. So even more verse 13 says this is a ministry to all Christians.

So this means we need to have a vision and a plan for each individual Christian and this involves everyone in your family. It involves you. It involves others in your sphere of influence that God gives you to disciple.

We need to have a vision and a plan for each one of those people in every church to grow to full maturity in Christ. So there's three very different possible understandings of discipleship. Two of which will lead you entirely in the wrong direction and one of which will lead you to fulfill what the scripture is talking about here.

So let me give you three types of discipleship. Specialist, generalist, and hot mess. I bet you've never heard that used in a sermon.

Let me explain the difference between those three terms and let me start with hot mess. That's an American slang phrase. If you look that up in the urban dictionary it'll be defined as a derogatory term describing a situation behavior or appearance that is disastrously bad.

So if you describe someone as a hot mess what you're saying is they are truly messed up. And so what I am calling hot mess discipleship means no discipleship or even worse than that it means the idea of the church is a kind of alcoholics anonymous gathering like a sinners anonymous right. At AA people stand up and say hi my name is such and such and I'm an alcoholic.

In hot mess discipleship the Christian shows up at church and it's kind of like their attitude is hi my name is such and such and I'm a sinner. I was born a sinner. I'm a sinner now and I'll be a sinner when I die.

My life is really messed up. Thank God for grace because I can't turn anything around. Christ being in my life means I'm no different than I was before Christ came in my life but I am forgiven.

Now it's absolutely true that we're sinners but the scripture's identity of choice for us is not sinners it is saints. Every letter of the new testament that Paul writes is written to the saints. It's not written to the sinners and that's an important distinction.

To the saints. It doesn't say to the sinners because it does make a difference that Christ lives in us. We are more than forgiven.

We are in the process of being transformed. We are in the process of the the scriptures doing a work in our life because of the power of the holy spirit and so the imagery that the scriptures lay out for us is not being a hot mess. The interesting thing is is that you do not see in the scriptures the scriptures saying we are so messed up and we're going to be messed up our whole lives and that's just the way it's going to be.

The imagery that's used in the bible interestingly quite often is the imagery of the soldier. So we have for example the word of God is described as a two-edged sword and so there's a reason why it's a two-edged sword and that's we're going to need it for the work that we're going to do as we put on the armor of God. That's another phrase that's used.

That's another image that's used. So whereas many Christians today see themselves as poor and pitiful and in no way able to grow in Christ, the bible is a very different image. We're given a sword.

We're given armor and we're pressed into battle. In fact, the bible says that we're to take every thought captive to Christ. It gives us work to do.

We don't have time to in our sin. Our calling is not to sin and get forgiven. If you were to hear some Christians talk they would you would think that the vocation of the Christian is to show up every week to get forgiven for the fact that we didn't change, but that's not what the bible has for us to do.

Our job is to carry out the vocation of a redeemed humanity. God saved us for a purpose. He has a job for us to do.

Our job is to mirror the image of Christ into the world. We're going to fall short in sin along the way, yes, but when we do, our job in that process is to repent of it, confess it, receive his pardon, and get back in the fight. We are not just trophies of grace.

We are not the old drunk uncle who always needs to be picked up out of the gutter by our good nephew Jesus. What we are in this process are his mighty warriors. He has a work for us to do and it's grace powered and sometimes we're going to just flat out fail and fall on our face, but we are not defined by our failure.

We're defined by this transformation. It's a supernatural work. Change is underway in us and we are not who we were yesterday and we're not who we're yet going to be tomorrow.

So much for hot mess discipleship. That's not discipleship at all. It's not discipleship to show up week after week and say, I'm no different than I was before Jesus came into my life.

Praise God he doesn't care. That's not the message of the New Testament. So that's one possible error in our way of thinking about discipleship.

A second error in thinking about discipleship is what we call specialist discipleship and that's misunderstanding in the church today is the idea that the reason why we come to church is to find our calling, to fill our own little niche, to grow in the ways that we think we can grow but not worry about the rest. So that misunderstanding in the church is the idea that all Christians have a different specialty. One Christian does one kind of ministry.

Another Christian does another kind of ministry and too often that's the church's way of thinking about these things, but it's wrong. It comes from a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 12. 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is talking about the body of Christ and in verse 12 he talks about the body being composed of many parts.

He says in the body of Christ there's a foot, there's an ear, and there's an eye. And so some Christians say, all right, I'm going to be the foot. I want to be the eye, right? And the faulty thinking in this, let me explain why this is faulty thinking.

One of the things that we understand from science today is if you were to take a cell from someone's foot, you can actually recreate the whole body. You can clone the whole body if you take a cell from someone's ear because in every cell of the human body is the full DNA of the body. You see, so even though at times as Christians we have special ministries, it doesn't mean that we specialize so that we don't participate or grow in the other ways.

So if we say that one Christian is only going to be trained to be an eye and that's all they know how to be is an eye, that's not biblical because even if I'm serving in the church as an eye, I also need to know how to be a foot. I need to know how to be a hand or I need to know how to be an eye depending on the needs of the body. And that's why Ephesians 4.13 says that all Christians are called to grow to full maturity in Christ.

So discipleship is not about finding one particular ministry and growing in that. Discipleship is about the process of learning to do all of these different things as a way of understanding what Christ first has done for us. So we've got to be wary of that thinking.

We've got to be wary of that idea of being a specialist where, for example, you might hear somebody say, hey, I'm a drummer in the band at church. My ministry is to focus on drumming, right? So kind of blocking out everything else. Or you'll sometimes hear people say, my ministry is preparing food after the service.

That's what I do. That's my ministry. Don't ask me to do anything else.

And it's very common in the church, but it's not biblical because Christ is not a specialist. Christ is a generalist. If you read in the scriptures, that's one of the things you'll see about Jesus is that he doesn't specialize in one area.

He is a generalist and he trains all of his disciples to be generalists. It's a fascinating thing that you'll notice about Jesus and his 12 disciples. He had 12 disciples, but he didn't call each one to focus on a specific area.

He never divided up into specialties. He didn't say, all right, Andrew, you're going to be the cook and John, you're going to do the evangelism. Peter, you'll be the healer.

He trained them all to do evangelism. He trained them all to do healing. He trained them all to do all of these different works of mercy.

And the reason why he trains them in this way is that, so that each of them can serve as a picture of him. That word Christian, the reason why we're called Christians, that word means a little Christ. That's where the word comes from.

To be a little picture of Christ, a little wallet-sized picture of Christ. The picture is not perfect. It's still developing, but from the very beginning of the creation of the human race, the human is designed.

The reason why God creates the human is to be a picture of God. It's how it is that the visible world sees God is through us, his creation. So Adam and Eve, of course, they missed that part.

They blew that. They plunged the whole race into sin. But when Christ comes, one of the vital and most overlooked aspects of his ministry is to reclaim for you and me the ministry that God had for us to do from the beginning.

His followers, in whom the Holy Spirit lives, our job is to be little pictures of Christ to the world. We're little mirrors mirroring to the world the grace and goodness that we have abundantly received from Christ. We didn't just receive one kind of ministry from Christ.

Christ did all of these things for us, and so we mirror all of these things back to the world. Now Christ was and is a generalist. As a result of that, every picture of Christ needs to be the picture of a generalist.

Our job isn't to be so good in one area and completely incompetent in the other areas of ministry. If in the church we only have specialists, then it's not Christ whom people see. So if someone says, oh my ministry is to cook the meal after the service, they're only going to focus on what they want to do, or believe that they can do, or feel good about doing, or feel confident about doing.

And the problem with that is that when people look at you, they're not going to see Christ. They're going to see what you feel confident in doing. And you're not going to turn to Christ because you'll be doing the areas that you're really good at.

So if you're good at singing, you'll love to sing. But if you don't feel like you're good at singing, then you're not going to sing. And so people never come to see Christ.

They see you doing what you want to do. So the fullness of the Holy Spirit dwells in each of us. You didn't get a part of the Holy Spirit.

You've got the whole thing. You've got the whole person of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. And so we're designed to resemble all of Christ, not just one part of Christ.

And so Christ wants us to rely on him as we grow to become like him in every way, not just the one or two ways that we understand or feel like we could be good at. And the best way to do that is to be comprehensively, systematically trained in ministries that are different from what we like to do or that we're skilled in. So whenever we do something that's outside of our natural gifting, that's a great thing because we end up being able to demonstrate our reliance on Christ.

For example, Mrs. Foley, she's the president of our SoulUSA organization. She's getting her doctorate, but she's also a really good cook. And so it's one of her favorite things to do.

You know, on the other hand, I am a terrible cook. And this is why you all try to prevent me from cooking. But when Mrs. Foley cooks, she can use her skills, right? Now, fortunately, on the one hand, it'd be very easy for her not to rely on God when she cooks, right? She could just come downstairs without thinking about it.

She could prepare dinner. She could prepare whatever the meal is and do it in her own strength. And fortunately, she doesn't do that.

She prays hard for every meal because she embodies these principles we're talking about, right? But if we're doing something we're good at, it's really easy to do that without relying on God. But when I cook, because I'm not good at cooking, I have to pray hard, right? And you have to pray hard for me because you have to eat the food. So it's a good thing when we have Christians serve outside their areas of their skill because they learn to rely on God.

So that's why our process is set up the way it is. That throughout the year, you're going to be doing things that you're not good at that you say, I don't think I could do that. Because that's how you learn to grow to be like Christ.

God's vision is that we would train disciples in that way. God wants us to train disciples by throwing them in the deep end of the pool. That's the way Jesus trained disciples.

He trained them to be generalists, not specialists. The goal wasn't to say, hey, find what you're good at and do it. Find what you love to do and do it.

That's what the world says, but it's not what we do. Our job is to grow to the people, the fullness in Christ, so they can reflect Him fully by doing all things well by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So even though Jesus's disciples might focus on one ministry at a particular point in time, they still know how to do those other ministries.

Man, you better be good at those other ministries because in your family, you're the only one who can teach other people to do those things. It's not your job to bring people to church and drop them off and say, train my kids. That's your job to do, to train them to be Christians or little Christs, little mirrors of Christ to the wall.

That's been the vision of the church for 2000 years. But in our modern times, we've lost that vision because we think about church like business. And in business, we think about our business thinking we apply that to Christianity.

So we think about the church the way, for example, people build cars and people build a car. One person does this job, another person does this job, another person does this job. So we developed our churches

this way.

You do the finance, you do the preaching, you do the singing. But there's a real problem with that because that's not the way Jesus built the church. When Jesus did discipleship, they didn't have specialization in that way.

It was a very alien concept. You think back to the culture of Jesus where people are farmers, right? Farmers have to learn to do everything. They're even making their own clothes, right? They're cooking their own food.

They're planting their own crops. They're even preaching their own messages to their family. In many cases, especially, for example, in the United States, for the first hundred years, people had to learn how to get by without pastors because pastors weren't around very often.

They would ride a circuit and the pastor would show up every so often. But people had to learn to be able to teach their family the Bible. So that's the kind of attitude the Bible has.

It's not the attitude of the car assembly line but the attitude of training disciples to be able to do all of these different aspects of discipleship. So I want to give you a strategy for discipling Christians in order to help them be generalists so they can mirror Christ. I want you to look in Matthew chapter 22 verses 34 through 40.

Matthew 22, 34 through 40. This is what Matthew wrote. Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? And Jesus replied, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

So here Jesus is talking about two commandments. Love God and love neighbor. Now I want to show you another scripture which is very similar to this but unfortunately many people haven't linked them together.

They don't see how they're connected. So we're in Matthew so go back a few chapters to Matthew chapter 7 now. Matthew chapter 7 verses 24 through 27.

I want you to turn there and put a bookmark there because this is the passage. I want you to practice this week and learn in your family worship time. Matthew chapter 7, 24 through 27.

I want you to study this one individually, share it with your family, memorize it and have somebody share it every night. It goes like this. This is Jesus talking.

Matthew 7, 24 through 27. Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who builds his house upon the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock.

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who builds his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against the

house and it fell with a great crash. That's the scripture I want you to learn this week.

I want you to practice it with your families. Now in verse 24 Jesus talks about two commandments and even though it doesn't sound like these are the same commandments he talked about in Matthew chapter 22. I want you to see the connection in Matthew chapter 24.

He said love God, love your neighbor and in this passage he says hear the word, do the word. He links together those two. Loving God matches up with hearing the word.

Loving your neighbor matches up with doing the word. Do you see that connection? We love God by hearing the word. That's how God shows his love for us.

It's through the scriptures. It's through those internal spiritual disciplines prayer or worship that we're doing every week and growing in those. That's loving God, it's hearing the word and then we love our neighbor and we do the word through those external disciplines, these works of mercy.

When we disciple people help them grow to fullness in Christ we've got to do both of those things. We've got to keep both of those things in focus and we've got to keep them linked because Jesus says they are like unto each other and Jesus says if you separate them it's like building a house on sand. So when we disciple people we've got to focus on their internal spiritual development and their external ministry and in Matthew 7 Jesus says whoever hears my words and does them is like a man who builds his house upon the rock.

He goes on to say when that link is broken the house falls and one of the most common discipleship problems today is that these two areas are split. Hearing and doing the word, loving God, loving your neighbor, those are split. So many churches are very good at the hear the word discipleship part.

They know it's very important but they neglect the do the word discipleship part. So they study scripture all the time but they never say let's go out and do it. Let's do the word that we just heard and there's no word that you should hear without also doing it.

It's that it's not that you store it up and at some point in time you go out and do it all. It's that you've got to learn it and do it. Learn it and do it.

Learn one scripture and do it. Learn one scripture in that week and go out and practice it that week. And so these are the churches that end up considering feeding the hungry to be less important than your prayer life for example.

You probably think of words churches like this and unfortunately when we separate out the two if we focus on hearing the word but not doing the word we lack impact. If we separate hearing and doing the word and we only do hearing we lack impact. Christ wants us to impact the word the world but we can't swing the other way either.

If we do the word but don't hear it we lack power. So we've got to join together the doing the hearing and the doing of the word in order to have impact and power. That's how it is that we're going to have this internal growth and this external impact.

But I don't want you to come away thinking that it means hey study the bible some but then go out and also do some ministry. It's not just about doing some of each. It's that we've got to link our hearing and

doing of the word that we are studying.

So when we study that word we're going to go out and do it. That's why every month we focus on a different work of mercy and then we go out and do it. We don't just hear the scripture about how Christ has done it for us and then treasure that up in our hearts.

We say now that we understand how he's done it to us and we've received it we're going to go out and do it to other people. And that's the only way we can come to know God fully is through the linking together the hearing and the doing of the word. When you go out and do the word it illuminates the hearing of the word.

So you won't even understand what God did for you until you go out and do that same thing that he did for other people. That's how you come to receive the grace of God. You don't do ministry to other people because you want God to love you and care for you.

That's of course works righteousness. Instead you do it because it's how you come to know God more fully in the grace that he showed you. But I want to show you when you separate out the hearing and doing the word you run into two problems.

The first is legalism. Let me tell you what legalism is. Legalism is an ungodly focus on spiritual growth that is internal.

Jesus talks about how people in his day would tithe even their spices. See the problem is he said they neglected the weightier matters of the law. And you see this even in the old testament Isaiah 58.

The Israelites cried out to God. They said we have been fasting but you didn't notice. Come on.

Come on. Give us some credit here. Why aren't you paying attention to us? And God says because you broke the link.

He said the kind of fast I have chosen for you is to share your bread with the poor. You see you've always got to link together the internal spiritual growth through the external doing of the word. And so when you separate out the two and you focus on internal spiritual growth.

Oh you're having a great prayer life. Oh you're memorizing the scripture. Oh you're deep in worship.

You got the eyes closed, the hand going, you're praising God. The problem is if all you're focused on is the internal spiritual growth you will fall into legalism. Now if you separate the two out and you focus on the doing of the words without the hearing of the word you enter into works righteousness.

As I say that's the belief that we need to do certain things in order to go to heaven or to earn God's love. The reason why we have that attitude is because we separated out the hearing and the doing of the word. And so many churches today are nervous of the doing of the word because they say I don't want to become works righteous.

Well you don't you don't not become works righteous by stopping doing the word because then you'll become legalistic. The way you stop being works righteous is to link together the hearing and the doing of the word. So it's amazing.

Terrible things happen anytime we separate out the hearing and the doing of the word. Heresy happens and great things happen every time we link the hearing and the doing of the word. The goodness of God is made real to us and visible to others.

That's a good thing and none of this happens just because we want it to. It takes a comprehensive process of discipleship that makes you something more than a hot mess and something more than a specialist. It requires a system of discipleship that's rooted in the Holy Spirit and circumscribed by the love of Christ and the grace of God.

Now fortunately scripture and church history have bequeathed to us everything we need to do all that. We don't have to invent it. It's already been done for us and it's to these tools that we'll turn next week as we begin week by week to install our plan for growing to fullness in Christ through the hearing and the doing of the word.

Thanks Pastor Foley and he began to give them his attention expecting to receive something from them but Peter said I do not possess silver and gold but what I do have I give to you in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene walk and seizing him by the hand he raised him up and immediately his feet and ankles were strengthened. You've been listening to the Reverend Eric Foley on .wfm radio for the underground church in the west and for more information on .w evangelical church go to ericfoley.com

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