

1

WHERE DISCIPLE-MAKING BEGINS

Go . . . make disciples.

—MATTHEW 28:19

They walked in, anonymously mixing with the Temple crowd. What was so special about one more couple bringing their baby for the commanded visit? Mary and Joseph were probably just as nervous as you were your first time out in public with a newborn. Still learning about the cries and needs of the baby who had changed every routine of their lives, they were no doubt more focused on the baby than anything else.

They had been taught about the importance of this visit. They had witnessed other parents making this first family trip to God's house. Now it was their turn. Pride tumbled with wonder. Joy wrestled with fear. They were to raise this child for God. The only way to begin was with obedience.

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The timeless truth about this visit is that it would have been the same no matter who the baby or parents were. It reminds us that God believes in families. It tells us that if Jesus' parents needed to keep this appointment with God's command, we can do no less.

For Christians, parenting is about more than just raising good kids. It's about raising *God's* children *God's* way. It's about keeping trust with God and His Word. From the beginning of time, God demonstrated His belief that the family is the best place to learn about Him and how to live in His world.

While good parenting skills and church involvement are critical, they are not a substitute for godly nurture and teaching at home. Christian parents need to do more than raise good kids who go to church. They need to raise disciples who want to follow Jesus as long as they live.

Discipleship isn't something you can add to life like a special trip. Discipleship *becomes* the life of any follower of Jesus. To raise a generation of disciples who will continue to change their world with the transforming message of the gospel requires parents and others who themselves are making this same commitment.

Today's parents are the ones who grew up in the church with specialized ministries for every age group. The church has sold itself as [the place] to meet all your needs. In return, parents don't know or think to realize that *they* are the forming center in a child's life and the church is a supporting beam in the process.

—Cindi, pastor of family life

The story of Legion in the New Testament demonstrates the importance Jesus places on home and family. Legion was the lunatic who lived in the caves. The transforming call of Jesus sent his demons packing and gave Legion his right mind back. Legion understood this as nothing short of a miracle. Of course, he wanted to follow the Miracle Worker. He was ready to get in the boat and leave everything, just as the Twelve who traveled with Jesus had done.

“Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).

Parents don't have to guess where their disciple-making mission takes place. It's at home with their children. Home should be where children expect to hear the salvation stories of their parents. It should be the place where words about God

and the actions and attitudes of our lives deliver the same message. Home is where we learn how to be disciple-makers.

Talking with your children about spirituality is like talking about sexuality: many want to do it but don't know how.

—Bruce, father of three

However, God doesn't dump this discipleship responsibility into the lap of parents without support. Nor does He want a child without Christian parents to be like the seed that dies for lack of a nurturing context. He expects the faith community to be an integral part of discipling His children. God knows that it will take more than parents and extended family to raise a life-long follower of Christ. It will take every pastor, every teacher, and every volunteer who intersects a child's life. It will take a focused, consistent, and ongoing approach from every Christian who has influence with children. No one is exempt in the discipling process.

When Jesus delivered His last verbal instructions before His ascension, He said, "Make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). It wasn't a suggestion for us to vote on or an idea to consider. Jesus had already given His life for this one-on-one approach. He empowered the Eleven with His plan for making disciples: "Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you" (Matthew 28:20, NLT).

Think about children as fledgling followers. Think about their eagerness for adventure, their innocent trust, their boundless energy. Think about channeling everything that childhood offers with the goal of growing disciples. What would happen if innocent trust keeps growing? What would happen if energy fuels mission? What would happen if the adventure of following Jesus never waned? They would not only change their world—they would change ours as well.

All followers of Jesus receive the same instructions—parents, friends, family, ministry volunteers, and pastoral staff. Anyone who touches a child's life is on call for Jesus to use as a disciple-maker.

However, it takes a disciple to make a disciple. It takes those who have made following Jesus a daily commitment to lead someone else along the same road. That's where it gets up-close and personal. That's where those who work with children must examine their own lives as disciples and ask some serious questions:

- What happens if children follow Jesus in the same way I do?
- Am I willing to be transparent about my own journey as a disciple of Jesus?
- Where do I substitute knowledge for relationship?

A DISCIPLE IS . . .

Let's start with a definition easy enough for a child to understand: A disciple is someone who follows Jesus, loves Jesus,

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learns from Jesus, and obeys Jesus in all of life. Discipleship is a relationship with Jesus that's based on love, guided by His commandments, and nurtured in a community of faith. Discipleship is both a decision about life and the life itself.

For parents, this definition is a reminder of their accountability to Jesus as the real parental authority in a child's life. Parents need more than their best ideas to raise disciples. They need to know that Jesus leads them as they parent His children. It means everything sends them back to God and His Word—sibling rivalry, leisure boundaries, scheduling priorities, discipline—it's all about discipling.

What Parents Say

- Find teachable moments each day to model what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
—Kati, mother of two
- Our primary responsibility as parents is to pass on our faith to our children.
—Belinda, mother of two
- I know this is my responsibility, but I'm often unsure of how I'm doing.
—DaVonne, mother of nine
- I feel like I have the knowledge, I have the support; I just don't have whatever it takes to make important things a priority over urgent things that demand my attention.
—Michele, parent
- I think for most parents communicating with their children on a spiritual level can be intimidating.
—Betty, mother of four

What Ministry Workers Say

- Discipleship is not ideas and resources—it’s a lifestyle that needs to be modeled.
—Cindi, pastor of family life
- As children’s ministry workers, we’re only the “surrogates.”
—Tammy, ministry worker
- Parents need to see their own need for discipleship, no matter how long they’ve been a part of the Church.
- Wise is the mom or dad who lives out Christ 24/7 in front of his or her kids.
—Jerry, children’s ministry consultant

For teachers and others who invest in children’s lives, the definition gives the real reason for their involvement in the life of a child. They must answer the question “How does my involvement in this child’s life grow a disciple?” They can’t allow themselves to get sidetracked by teaching information or rules to the exclusion of modeling what a disciple looks like, talks like, thinks like, acts like, and loves like.

Disciple-making doesn’t happen by accident. It isn’t caught by reading Bible stories together. It isn’t just a set of skills or answering Bible questions correctly, and it certainly isn’t just about faithful church attendance. Discipleship is a matter of the heart and will, mind and soul, body and spirit. There’s nothing that a person says, thinks, dreams, or does that doesn’t come under the discipleship umbrella.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

No matter what your relationship to a child is, there's a discipling role for you to play. Sometimes it's impromptu. Sometimes it's planned. Sometimes you're the primary discipler. Sometimes you're support. It's body life in action.

Take a look at the following components of disciple-making. How are you doing with the children within your circle of influence?

Live a daily commitment to Jesus. First of all, a disciple keeps his or her life as a follower of Jesus up to date. Every day is an opportunity to apply fresh insights about how following Jesus makes a difference in relationships, in contentment, in goal-setting, in everything. It's when we connect these life lessons to the Scripture and principles we want children to understand that it begins to turn light bulbs on for them.

Model what it means to follow Jesus. Nothing substitutes for a flesh-and-blood example, because children are literal and concrete. They don't apply ideas as easily as they follow examples. God understands that we all learn that way. That's why God brought Jesus to us in the flesh—because ideas and instructions aren't enough. We must also commit ourselves to show and not just tell how to live as a disciple. We must be honest about how discipleship shows up in our television and movie choices. We must be honest about how it governs our decisions about money and time. We can't offer them our best idea about being a disciple—we have to offer them our *journey*.

Tell the story. The story God wants us to share is about a love that never goes away. It's about how God spared nothing to rescue us from our own destructive self-centeredness. Tell the

story to children as many times as you can. Use pictures and activities and books. No other story has the potential to give children their most valuable gift—eternal life.

Spend one-on-one time. At some point, discipling is a one-on-one model. You can successfully teach the big principles, the great stories, and the basic skills in groups with activities. But group discipling will always fall short. It's the one-on-one process that encourages questions, gives uniquely shaped encouragement, and provides personal accountability. For parents, this can take place in the car, during a meal, before bedtime, and in a number of impromptu moments that open up each day. For ministry volunteers, this might mean time before class, a scheduled time outside of class, a personal exchange in an unplanned encounter. Not every teacher may be able to make a one-on-one commitment with each child, but every child should have more than a parent committing one-on-one time.

Read and discuss God's Word together. There's no substitute for God's Word. It must have a central place in the home and classroom. Home issues should make you search the Scriptures for God's principles. Classroom questions should do the same. If our children never see us answer their questions by searching God's Word, how can we expect them to make their own personal discoveries?

Help children become disciple-makers. When anyone decides to follow Jesus as His disciple, he or she also joins the disciple-making mission of God's plan. As parents and ministry workers, we must help children understand this component of being a disciple.

Pray together. Discipling children takes more than praying *for* them. It takes praying *with* them. There are many opportu-

nities throughout a family's day when this can happen. Other disciple-makers must also look for opportunities. Don't simply tell a child that you'll pray *for* him or her. Pray *with* the child first.

Encourage questions. Let children's questions tell you what they're ready to learn. From simple curiosity to critical inquiry, questions open doors to personal learning and application. Don't expect to have all the answers. Sometimes their questions make you a learner with them in a way that bonds all of you as disciples in the making.

Celebrate growth. We celebrate good grades, soccer game wins, birthdays, and any number of accomplishments in the lives of our children. How do we celebrate a decision to follow Christ with equal enthusiasm? How do we celebrate when a child rejects temptation or applies something from God's Word to life? This is a fun way to support a child on a discipleship journey. Perhaps when we start celebrating discipleship milestones in the same way we celebrate other events, children will get the message—discipleship rocks!

TIME TO GET SERIOUS

It's time for all of us to stop passing the buck. Parents want the church to do a better job teaching children about following Jesus. The church wants the home to do a better job. The truth is that by working together, we'll all do a better job raising disciples for the next generation.

We have the most exciting adventure ahead of us. And the statistics are in our favor. Early training does make a difference. Godly models do matter. While there's no guaranteed formula for instant results, we can have the confidence of knowing that

there's nothing God wants more than for us to help Him get His children home.

Will it take new ideas? Probably. Will it take a wisdom that doesn't come from books? Absolutely. Most of all, it will require that each of us takes himself or herself to the Master Disciple-maker. As we present ourselves to Jesus, ask for His empowerment, and obey His instructions, we'll become the disciples our children need.

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FOR PARENTS

1. Where have I expected the church to be responsible for my children's discipleship?
2. What will happen if my children reproduce the way I follow Jesus?
3. When can I plan a special time to share my salvation story with my children.
4. Where do I need to take following Jesus more seriously?

FOR MINISTRY WORKERS

1. Where have I taught lessons about following Jesus without sharing my journey?
2. Who needs one-on-one discipleship time from me?
3. What demonstrates my commitment to discipling children?
4. What can I do differently as a disciple-maker this week as I intersect the lives of children?

A DISCIPLE-MAKER'S PRAYER

Loving God, if following you helps others follow you—especially children—then help me follow more closely, obey more completely, and share my journey more specifically.—An earnest follower