

**BE A DISCIPLE, NOT A BELIEVER****ACTS 6:1, 11:26**

There's an old *Family Circus* cartoon that shows a little boy and his father leaving a cemetery after visiting Grandpa's fresh grave. On the tombstone was Grandpa's name, along with his date of birth and his date of death with the customary dash in between. The boy made this observation, "Daddy, I guess Grandpa's life was just the dash between the numbers." So is your life and mine. What kind of impact or influence will your life have upon your family, your closest friends, and your brothers and sisters in Christ? What you leave is your legacy. A legacy is something of value you hand down to the generations of people that come after you. It usually means something that will bless or benefit them. For most people, it means money or property. For God's people, it means something completely different. That's what I'd like to explore with you over the next five weeks: how to finish your life and my life well; how to leave a godly legacy to those who follow us or come behind us generationally.

Regardless of your age, the beginning of a new year is an excellent time to reflect on the end of your life. If you are going to finish well, it will be because you made a decision to be a disciple of Jesus, not just a believer in Jesus. What's the difference? Biblically, there is no difference. The words translated "believer," "Christian," or "disciple" in the New Testament are interchangeable. For example: "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing..." (Acts 6:1 NLT) "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:26 NLT) When Jesus and the leaders of the early church spoke of disciples they were referring to everyday Christians not some spiritually elite group of believers.

But in the current state of American Christianity, there's a huge difference between being a believer and a disciple. On the one hand, a believer in Jesus is thought to be a person who simply believes certain things to be true about Jesus – He's the Son of God, He died on the cross for people's sins, He rose again from the dead, and if you acknowledge Jesus as your personal Savior you will then go to Heaven when you die and live there forever. On the other hand, a disciple of Jesus is often thought to be a super or elite Christian: someone who reads the Bible and prays every day, who tells people about Jesus frequently, or who serves as a pastor, missionary, or a church leader. Many American Christians are eager to consider themselves believers in Jesus, but slow to claim being disciples of Jesus. Why? They assume a disciple is some kind of advanced Christian. To say you're a disciple sounds a little proud. To call yourself a disciple connotes a level of dedication to Jesus that makes some of us uncomfortable.

I like how George Barna puts it. "We might define discipleship as becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ." Being a disciple isn't a church program you complete in six weeks, six months, or six years. It's a lifelong pursuit. Being a disciple isn't just for brand new followers of Jesus. It isn't just for Christian leaders either. Each and every believer is called to be a disciple of Jesus. Being a disciple isn't about trying to be perfect. You and I can't ever be perfect this side of Heaven. Instead, being a disciple is about trying to follow Jesus intentionally. Is that part of the legacy you will leave those who come after you? Here's what it means to be a disciple.

## **A DISCIPLE PURSUES PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND COOPERATES WITH GOD TO PRODUCE IT.**

What does the word “transformation” mean? “Trans” means to move something from one place to another. “Formation” means to change. The Bible says, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” (Rom 12:2 NLT) Spiritual transformation means moving from the person you are without Jesus toward the new person you are in Jesus. Pagan religions back in Jesus’ day made no connection between belief in a certain god and your personal behavior. Who or what you believed in wasn’t supposed to change you. Not so with being Jesus’ disciple! I love how the late Dallas Willard, puts it: “I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did.” In other words, Jesus isn’t asking you to live like a first century person. How do you think Jesus would act if He lived right now today in 2018? Figure that out and, then, go and live like that.

But, let’s fill out the picture a bit more. Being a disciple is a lifelong rather than an occasional effort. It’s a gradual process rather than a once-and-done event. We can be unconscious of what the Holy Spirit is doing in our minds and hearts. By the same token, there’s never a moment when God is not drawing us closer to Himself. Being a disciple is also a comprehensive change rather than just small, random changes. That word “transformation” gets to the heart of discipleship. It means change at every level of your life: your job, your career, your marriage, your parenting, your retirement, everything. I love the Scripture that says, “The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men.... They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13 NLT) The imprint of Jesus’ character was on them. Could someone look at your life or mine – our behavior and attitudes - and say, “Wow, he/she has been with Jesus!”

The Bible uses the image of taking off and putting on clothing. We’re called to get rid of sinful, negative attitudes and behavior like you would take off filthy, soiled clothing, and then put on godly, positive attitudes and behavior, like you would put on clean, spotless clothing after a good bath. For example, the Bible says, “Don’t lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.” (Col 3: 9-10 NLT) Notice how this is a cooperative effort. It will never happen without the Holy Spirit helping you every step of the way. But it will never happen unless you extend personal effort and become intentional about doing life the Jesus way. Being a disciple is personal effort energized by the Holy Spirit. Is that part of the legacy you will leave those who come after you? Here’s another way to be a disciple.

## **A DISCIPLE SEEKS TO LIVE LIFE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OR UNDER JESUS’ LORDSHIP.**

To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to live under Jesus' Lordship and vice-versa. Every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But not every Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit. "Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Eph. 5:18 NLT) Why would we be told to do something that had already been done for us? A person who gets drunk surrenders himself or herself to alcohol. A disciple of Jesus surrenders himself or herself to the Holy Spirit. Just like alcohol can exert power or dominate a person's life in a negative way, the Holy Spirit can exert power and dominate your life and mine in a positive, God-honoring way.

There's at least four important facts about being filled with the Holy Spirit from that one verse. First, it's a command, not a suggestion. God doesn't say, "May I suggest you get filled with the My Spirit?" No, it's a command. Be filled with the Spirit. Secondly, the subject of the verb – "be filled" - is plural, meaning that every Christian is called to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not an experience reserved for elite, advanced Christians. It's a command given to every Christian; therefore, it's something that every follower of Jesus should experience. If you're not filled with the Holy Spirit, there's clearly something deficient about your relationship with God. Third, the verb is in the passive voice – "be filled with the Spirit." This isn't something you work up or produce on your own. This is something that the Holy Spirit does to you and in you. But, it's not totally passive. After all, in order to get drunk, you have to drink. Likewise, in order to be filled with the Spirit, you have to open yourself to His influence.

Fourth, the verb is in the present tense which means continuous, ongoing action. It's entirely correct to translate that verse as, "...keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit." Being filled with the Holy Spirit should keep on happening to you over and over again with increasing frequency the longer you follow Jesus. If we had the time today to look more deeply at Ephesians 5, we'd see what being filled with the Holy Spirit looks like. When you're filled with the Spirit, you demonstrate godly attitudes and behavior. You live wisely. You make the most of every spiritual opportunity God gives you. You have joy in your life. You're consistently thankful despite life's disappointments. You have a submissive, easy to get along with spirit with other people.

So, how do you get filled with the Holy Spirit? It's not found through an ecstatic experience with God. Instead, it's found through daily surrender or submission to Jesus as your Lord. When we say Jesus is our Lord, it simply means He is our Boss 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year. We acknowledge His right to tell us how to live in every aspect of our lives. I find many Christians never quite understand that very important fact. If you like the fact that Jesus is your Savior, but you resist or reject His Lordship of your life, you don't really understand Jesus or what He came to do. If you don't recognize Jesus' Lordship over you personally, I question if He has ever truly become your Savior. Jesus didn't die on the cross so you could just get a free "get out of Hell" card, but instead to make it possible for you to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Bible makes it quite clear you must recognize the Lordship of Jesus in a personal way for it to do you any good. "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:9 NLT)

I had the great privilege of being raised in a home where both my parents knew and loved Jesus. Like some of you, I don't recall the day or the hour I received Jesus as my personal Savior. I'm sure it happened when I was a relatively young child. I do remember, however, the circumstances that led to an understanding of Jesus as my Lord in a very personal way. I was in my sophomore year at a Christian high school and a kind of mini-revival swept the campus that fall. I realized Jesus wanted to be involved in every decision, every goal, every plan, and every ambition of my life. God revealed to me more deeply than ever before my own sinfulness and distance from Him. I was both humbled by God and yet strangely lifted up to God and loved by Him all at the same time. Jesus became real to me in a way that was new, fresh, empowering and life-changing. I knew that I no longer belonged to myself not as a theological point of doctrine, but as a living, personal reality. Jesus was my Lord. Something was forever settled as a result of that experience. Now, God has had to reinforce that experience many times in my life since. There have been many new occasions where I've needed to make a fresh, new surrender to Jesus' Lordship. There is still much in me that resists the Lordship of Jesus. My sinful nature still loves to sin. Parts of me still resist spiritual change. Parts of me still want to be independent of God.

Has something like that ever happened to you? No, it doesn't have to happen to you the same way that it did to me. The issue is whether it's happened to you, not how it happened or when it happened. You might say, "This kind of thing is supposed to happen to pastor types like you, Rick." The fact I ended up being a pastor is completely irrelevant. Submitting to the absolute Lordship of Jesus personally is something God wants for every one of His children. It means constantly giving Him the most control of your life that you're capable of giving Him at that point in time. You offer as much as you know about yourself today to as much as you know about God today. As you surrender to the Holy Spirit daily, He will keep on showing you areas of your life that need to be submitted to Him, turned over to Him, and surrendered to Him. A disciple is all about living a life filled with the Holy Spirit and under Jesus' Lordship. Is that part of the legacy you will leave those who come after you? Here's another thought.

### **A DISCIPLE OF JESUS IS COMMITTED TO AND INVOLVED IN THE CHURCH**

The Bible says, "Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." (Heb. 10:24-25 NLT) Apparently, even way back there in the first century a problem surfaced that's an even greater problem today: Christians who think they can be disciples of Jesus while bypassing or ignoring the local church. Those verses remind us that if you want to be a healthy follower of Jesus, you have to interact with and invest in His people. That might sound obvious to all of us here today, but all too many Christians in America today see no need to identify with any local church whatsoever. The Barna Research Group estimates that one out of every six adults who claim to be born again have no involvement in any local church. That's millions of people! Many so-called followers of Jesus reveal what they really believe on Sunday morning by their actions: "Jesus, yes, church, not so much." We've become a nation of "church shoppers" where our current

relationship to any local church is governed by whether it meets our needs at any given time. Some call it a kind of “dating the church” mentality meaning you just keep your options open all the time in case something better comes along.

Sadly, many Christians view this church or any church as optional to their spiritual growth and development. Many don't see this or any church as necessary to being a disciple of Jesus. Such an attitude is diametrically opposed to what we find in the Bible. One of the most fundamental images for the Church is that it's the body of Christ and Jesus Himself is the Head. “Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body.” (Col. 1:18 NLT) “All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.” (1 Cor. 12:27 NLT) It doesn't say there the church is *like* the body of Christ, but that it *is* the body of Christ. In other words, the Bible teaches that Jesus continues His incarnation by dwelling in and among His people spiritually. Jesus is no longer with us through His individual, physical body limited to one location, but instead through a complex, corporate entity called the Church.

If all that's true, then the implication is crystal clear. You can't be a kind of “Lone Ranger” follower of Jesus and be a healthy, effective disciple. God is a relational Being. He created you and me to be relational beings. You can only ever grow spiritually if you invest yourself intentionally in relationships with other people who also want to be disciples of Jesus. Our current emphasis on discipleship here in this church has bought into that biblical truth hook, line, and sinker. Discipleship only happens in and through relationships. Relationships – both with God and, also, with God's people - are essential to spiritual growth. If you want to be a healthy and effective disciple of Jesus, you will invest yourself in God's people. You'll be committed and involved.

“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another.” (Heb. 10:24-25 NLT) The word translated “motivate” there in v. 24 is a strong word. It means to stir one another up, to spur one another on, and even to provoke one another to grow spiritually. We need to motivate and encourage each other! Be aware that someone probably just walked in today who feels like he or she got emotionally mugged this week. Be available to God to offer a verbal word of motivation or encouragement. Put your arm around somebody today and tell him or her, “God loves you. May God bless you.” If someone tells you about a problem, stop and pray with him or her. Take the opportunity to encourage people to keep on living a life that honors the Lord – not in a proud, arrogant, judgmental way, but instead in a loving, tender, gentle way. Here's how it works in the body of Christ. Sometimes you'll need to receive encouragement. Other times you'll need to provide encouragement. That can't happen if you boycott God's people! Before you leave today, I want you to look around and see if anyone looks like they need motivation and encouragement from you. When the Holy Spirit gives you that little nudge, then go and do it! Is that part of the legacy you will leave those who come after you? Here's a final way you can be a disciple, not just a believer.

**A DISCIPLE LOVES LOST PEOPLE.**

It's been called Jesus' personal mission statement. He said it about Himself, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Lk. 19:10 NLT) If we're supposed to be following and trying to imitate Jesus as His disciples, we should care about what He cares about. Right? What does it mean to be "lost"? When something is lost, it's separated from its ideal environment. Jesus told three stories in Luke 15 that vividly illustrated spiritual lostness. I want to read the first two. (Luke 15:1-10) The sheep had been separated from the flock – the shepherd and the other sheep. The coin had been separated from its owner. Both were lost. People can be lost, too. The ideal environment for human beings is a close, growing, personal relationship with God Himself. But no one starts out that way. In fact, all of us start out life being lost. All of us start out in life separated from God because of something the Bible calls sin: an inner attitude of hostility - conscious or unconscious - toward God. We're lost spiritually.

Think about what each story tells us about Jesus and lost people. Jesus took the initiative to reach lost people. The lost sheep didn't seek the shepherd. The lost coin didn't find itself. Jesus doesn't expect lost people to find Him on their own. Instead, He expects His disciples to take the initiative to find lost people, reach out to lost people, and go after lost people. Identify specific lost people in your life and start praying for them. Build a personal relationship whenever possible. Look for opportunities to have a conversation about spiritual matters. Jesus considered lost people a top priority because they have great value to God. Both of Jesus' stories make the same point. Something of great value had come up missing – a sheep and a coin. Both were precious and important – the coin to the woman who owned it and the sheep to the shepherd. Jesus is saying that God is like the woman and like the shepherd. Lost people are precious and valuable to God. Did you know within two years most new Christians no longer have any non-Christian friends? It's just easier to hang out with people who think, act, and look at life the way you do (fellow Christians) instead of intentionally trying to point lost people to Jesus. But lost people mattered to Jesus. Do they matter to you? How much?

Jesus knew lost people are costly to be found. The shepherd put his own life at risk to go out in the dark looking for that dumb, lost sheep. Looking for her lost coin demanded considerable time, energy and aggravation for the woman. It cost Jesus a great deal to find lost people. That's the central story of the Bible. Jesus gave up Heaven and whatever it means to operate as God in that dimension and took upon Himself humanity with all of its limitations. He freely chose humiliation and rejection by other human beings. He allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross and killed because it was the only way that lost people could have their sins forgiven. Now if it cost Jesus that much to find lost people, it's likely to cost Jesus' disciples something, too. What will it cost you and me to help Jesus find lost people? It will cost you some time and energy. It will mean becoming intentional and taking some initiative. It might even cost you some awkwardness, rejection, or misunderstanding with lost people who don't want Jesus.

Then why love lost people? Jesus said, "There is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God.... There is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Lk 15:7, 10 NLT) Lost people who are found bring

God great joy. That's what happened in Heaven when you became a disciple of Jesus. Celebration! Every time a lost person is found God invites all of Heaven to join Him in a great cosmic celebration. The greatest joy in the universe isn't when a baby is born or when a couple deeply in love gets married – as wonderful as those events may be. No, it's when a lost person – someone once far from God – is found, when he surrenders to God's love and grace, when she becomes a child of God, when he starts to follow Jesus and when she becomes His disciple. Don't you want to make a contribution to that kind of celebration? Is that part of the legacy you will leave those who come after you?

One pastor of a large church admits he can't ever learn the names of all the people who attend his church. But he can still remember a very memorable introduction to Hazel, a woman he still didn't know well but who attended regularly. In an effort to be friendly, he asked her, "What do you do?" He expected to hear about her occupation. Instead, Hazel said, "Pastor, I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ cleverly disguised as a machine operator!" There's a lady who know who she is. If someone said, "Hazel? Oh, she's just a machine operator," Hazel might reply, "No! That's my clever disguise. My job puts me in a position to direct other machine operators to Jesus Christ."

What will be the impact of your life? What will be your legacy? Philosopher and author, William James, wrote, "The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it." There's no greater, higher use of life than to be a disciple of Jesus. It's the greatest legacy you can leave to your children, your grandchildren, other family members, friends, neighbors, other brothers and sisters in Christ – anyone and everyone. Do you want to leave a godly legacy? Believers in Jesus are a dime a dozen. Instead, be a disciple. Finishing well means being a disciple of Jesus, not just a believer in Jesus.