

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BEING WITH GOD



Session 3: What Does Daily Discipleship Look Like?

Whether or not we call ourselves Christians, we are all growing into being certain kinds of people.

The ways we are being formed are shaped by

- the things we give most attention to
- the choices we make
- the influence of the relationships we have.

To be a disciple is to welcome God to be the centre of all of these, growing into the people that He desires us to be – being with Him, becoming like Him, and joining in with Him.

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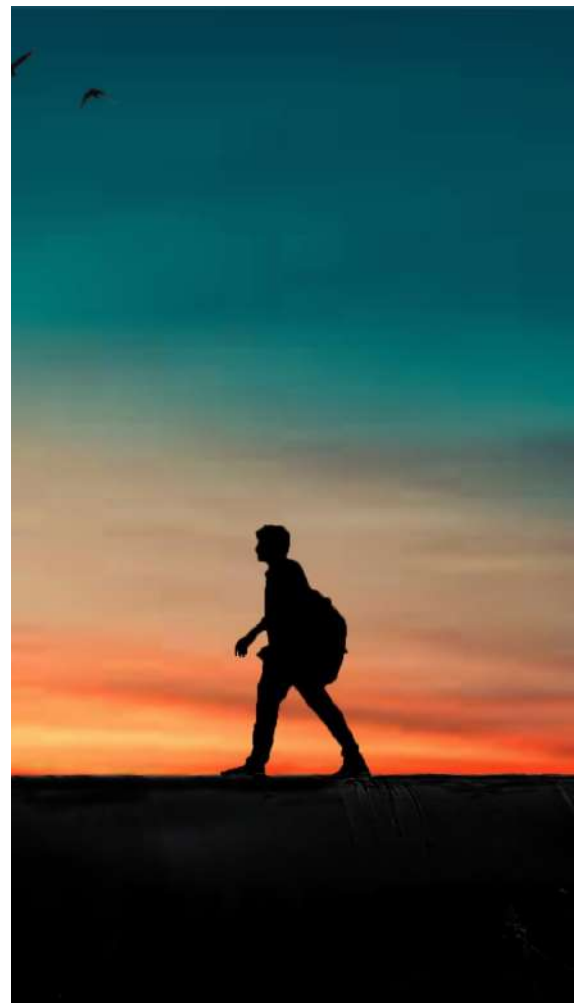
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What does this mean day by day?



On a daily basis how we put God at the centre is shaped by three things:

What we give attention to:

Being open to God's presence and paying attention to what He is saying, which leads to

The choices we make in what we do:

Responding to what He is saying in loving obedience, which leads to

The character we are becoming:

Enabling God to change me from the inside out to become more like Christ by putting into practice regular ways of living which open me up to the work of His Spirit.

(This is the focus of module 2 - Becoming like Christ)

This session focusses particularly on the first two:

How do we pay attention to God day by day?

And

what are the best reasons to respond in obedience to what He is saying?

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How do we pay attention to God day by day?

And

What are the best reasons to respond in obedience to what He is saying?





Why is paying attention to God at the heart of being a disciple?

We are constantly paying attention and responding to different voices in life. As we have seen, being a disciple at its most basic is growing in responding to God above all else.

Jesus said God's word is more important than food: "Humans do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)

He had a deep sense that His life was shaped by God's leading: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." (John 5:19).

One writer put it like this: "We are what we hear from God." (Emil Brunner.)

The meaning of the word "church" is to be people who are "called out" – in other words, those who respond to God's call.

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We are what we hear from God.”



How does Jesus' first "sermon" describe this?



In Mark 1: 14 we read, "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

When Jesus started His ministry, He began by telling people two important things:

That this was a particular moment to pay attention.

This was not just "ordinary", minute by minute time (chronos), this was a time when God was acting in a new way. When He said, "The time has come" the word for time (Kairos) is a specific time of opportunity.

He told them that this moment was a time when, "The kingdom of God has come near." All that God wants in the world is now close - His love, His presence, His healing. God is not far from people - and the whole of the gospels are full of people responding to God (as we saw in the story of Jacob from Genesis 28.)

From the beginning, Jesus is showing how at the heart of being a disciple is wanting to be open to His presence by recognising the moments where God is close, and how He is working. In our daily lives, the kingdom of God in God's world is near.

It may be that certain events - positive or negative - become the doorway to us recognising it, and asking, "God, how do you want me to respond?" God may speak through our successes or failures, through things we see, hear or read; large or small happenings, things we do or are done to us. The disciple will be growing in paying attention in all these things.

That this was the time to "Repent" and "Believe" - to respond to what God is doing by

Changing their way of thinking
- repenting means to "turn our minds" from seeing things our way to seeing things God's way.

Starting to live differently
- believing here is deeper than what goes on in our minds. It is starting to let our choices and relationships be shaped by how God is acting and calling us, demonstrating in our lived experience what we are really trusting in.

From the beginning Jesus is describing the heart of being a daily disciple as paying attention to God in moments of opportunity and responding by living in new ways.



What does this mean in my lived experience?



It means daily discipleship is a close relationship.

In the words of Pope Benedict 16th, "Faith is above all a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, and to experience his closeness, his friendship, his love; only in this way does one learn to know him even more, and to love and follow him ever more. May this happen to each one of us."

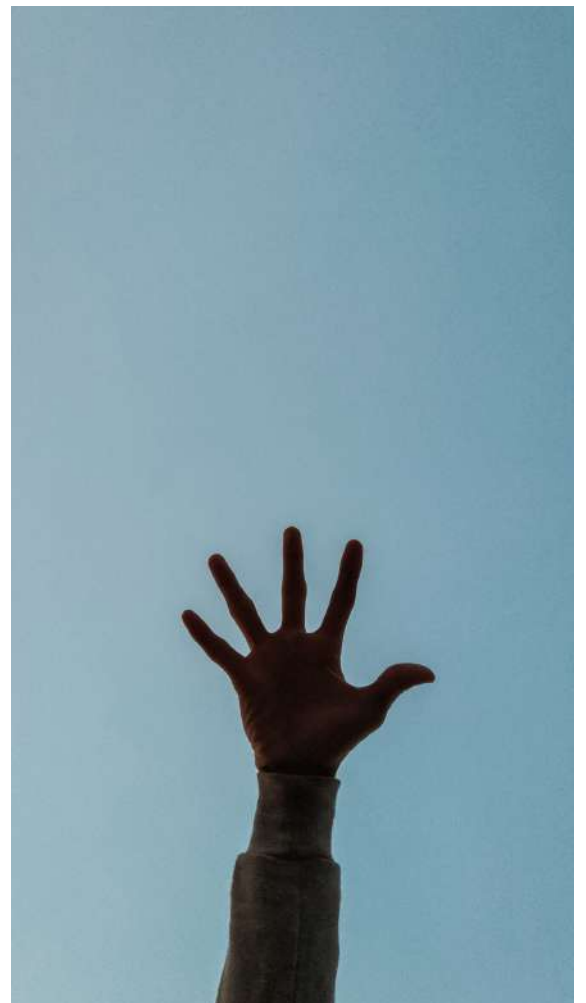
It reinforces the point that daily discipleship is growing in seeing where God is present in your life.

Archbishop Rowan Williams says,

“*The true disciple is an expectant person, always taking it for granted that there is something about to break through from the master, something about to burst through the ordinary and uncover a new light on the landscape.*”

The master is going to speak or show something; reality is going to open up when you're in the master's company and so your awareness ... is a little bit like that of a bird-watcher, the experienced bird-watcher, who is sitting still, poised, alert, not tense or fussy, knowing that this is the kind of place where something extraordinary suddenly bursts into view."

This session (and the whole of this module) is about helping us be disciples who grow in paying attention to God and responding to Him. As we journey together, our expectation will be that God's kingdom is near, and that each week He will be giving us the opportunity to respond.



Why is knowing God's teaching and putting it into practice at the heart of being a disciple?



It's possible to pay attention to God's presence, and to get to know His teaching, yet for that to make little difference in our lived experience. In a sense this is like "repenting" (changing the way we think), without believing (changing the way we live.)

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us a large amount of teaching on what the life of discipleship looks like. But, crucially, immediately after this there comes the parable of the wise and foolish builders. One builds on rock, and when, "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 the other builds on sand. When the storm comes, it "fell with a great crash."

Both builders have heard God's words and received His teaching. But that is not what makes the difference.

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The wise person in the parable, whose house remains standing, is the one “who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice.”



How does this relate to the difference between faith and belief?



The Greek word for faith, *pisteuo*, means putting faith into action. Faith is not having a mental list of beliefs but trusting someone enough to give them control of our lives.

Martin Luther distinguished between belief and faith using the image of a ship.

Standing on the seashore, pointing at a ship, and saying that you think it will take you to the other side of the sea is a statement of belief. Your life does not depend upon the ship.

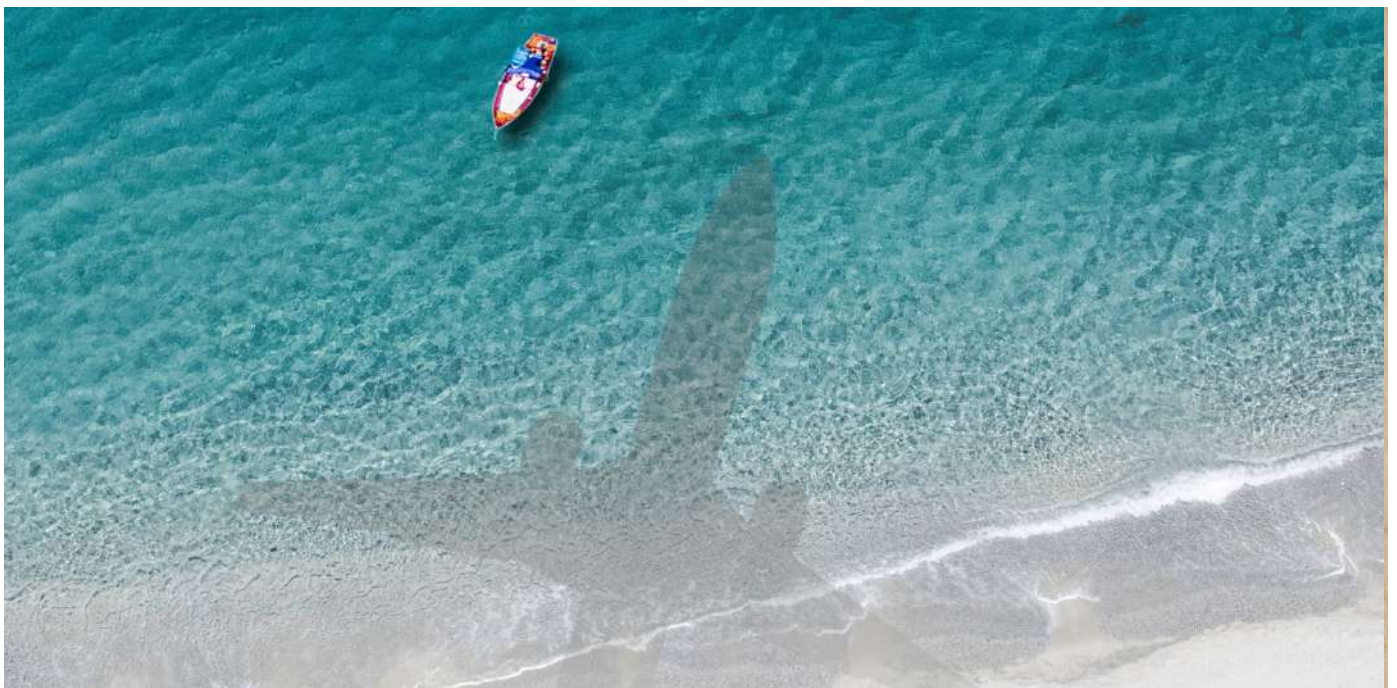
Getting on the ship and trusting it to take you to the other side of the sea is an act of faith. This faith is justified when the ship is reliable and takes you safely on your journey.

When Jesus called people to believe, it was with this sense of faith - He was calling them to entrust their whole lives to God in this way. At the heart of a daily life of discipleship is both paying attention to God and learning to put what He is saying into practice.

Because both these things matter, "The Way of Discipleship" offers teaching, but importantly it is also about the ways we put that teaching into practice. (In every module the first sessions focus on the content of teaching, helping us to grow in understanding, and the following sessions are helping us live out that teaching in our daily lives.)

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When Jesus called people to believe He was calling them to entrust their whole lives to God



What are the best motives for paying attention to God and responding to Him in the way we live?

As a response to God's love and grace.

We have seen how God is a God of love who calls us into covenant relationship. We obey God because He is God.

But as we go further, it's crucial that our daily obedience is only about responding to God's grace.

Imagine if you gave someone you love a gift for their birthday and they asked you, "Why did you do this?" Now imagine you reply, "Because I had to." Or, "Because I was afraid you would be angry if I didn't."

Wouldn't you have missed the whole point?



The only good reason for giving a gift is love.

Similarly, obedience and response to God which doesn't come from love is not only destructive for our lives but undermines our sense of God's great love for us.

The first and greatest commandment is to "Love God." Julian of Norwich put it like this,

“

The greatest honour we can give to God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love.”



Why is living in God's grace so essential?



It is easy for our “putting God’s teaching into practice” to slip into duty or legalism. This can crush our spirits, make us bitter and judging of others, and as we shall see, fail to transform the heart.

This is why Jesus criticised the Pharisees – not for their lack of obedience, but for their legalism. This is the message of the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who becomes embittered, and ends up serving his father, not out of love, but out of duty.

But the motive for being a disciple can only be because we are loved, forgiven and accepted by God, even before we think about obeying Him. “We love, because He first loved us.”

Scripture calls this undeserved, unconditional love grace. We have explored how God is love. His grace is the quality of love God has for us, and that Jesus’ life and death demonstrated, that gives complete and utter worth to anyone, regardless of who they are or how they live.

The starting place for obeying God can only be this: the more we grow in receiving His grace, the more we will want to pay attention and obey.

Responding to God in obedience is therefore effort, but it is never earning. We are already loved, whether we obey or not. As Paul writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.”

This is the jewel of Christian discipleship. As one writer puts it, “Christians affirm a foundation of identity that is absolutely unique in the marketplace of spiritualities. Whether we realize it or not, our being is grounded in God’s love. Love is our identity and calling.

Neither knowing God or knowing self can progress very far unless it begins with a knowledge of how deeply we are loved by God...

...In order for our knowing of God’s love to be truly transformational, it must become the basis for our identity....And identity grounded in God would mean that when we think of who we are, the first thing that would come to mind is our status as someone who is deeply loved by God.”

Jesus was fully obedient to God His Father, even to death. Scottish theologian Thomas Smal says that the motive for this was “not legal obedience driven by commandment but trusting response to known love.”

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We are already loved, whether we obey or not.”



Why is this so hard, but so important?



We live in a world of conditionality and are trained from childhood that good behaviour leads to reward, while bad behaviour leads to punishment.

We can therefore easily slip into experiencing discipleship as religiously trying to build a bridge to God (which is perhaps a little arrogant!). The reality of grace however is that God has, through Christ, built a bridge to us.

Christ was clear that it is only those who know they need to receive God's grace that will truly turn to Him: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Author Brennan Manning Manning calls this the "revelation bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, addicts, IRS agents, and even used car salesmen..."

In a reflection on the parable of the Prodigal Son, the parable which demonstrates God's unconditional love like nothing else, Rob Parsons says that the message of the story is that you can always come home. Whatever you have done, whoever you are,

Author Kathleen Norris has a moving realization of God's grace at an airport: "One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven.

And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt awe-struck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation. And, as Psalm 139 puts it, darkness is as nothing to God, who can look right through whatever evil we've done in our lives to the creature made in the divine image."

It is only God's grace that can give us the assurance that we are loved, and the motivation to serve Him. As an old man, the preacher Charles Simeon rejoiced in this love, saying, "Soon (my eyes) will behold all the glorified Saints and Angels around the throne of my God and saviour, He has loved me until death, and given himself for me; then I shall see him whom having not seen I have loved; In whom, though now I see him not, yet believing I rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Of the reality of this I am as sure as if I were there this moment."

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There will be a Father waiting, and there will always be a light on.”





What are the best motives for paying attention to God and responding to Him in the way we live?

As a way of living into our true identity.

The handout “The search for identity” from the Emmaus course shows why it’s hard in the contemporary for people to know “who they are”, and explores how people try and discover identity through “losing yourself” or “looking within”.

But it's worth repeating that in daily discipleship, one of the best reasons for responding to God is not to *gain* an identity but because He has *already given us* an identity.

In fact, while the world of consumerism might try and seduce us into building our own identity through what we own, Christians believe that it is only God who can truly tell us who we are.

It's only by receiving this identity that we will truly change - the more we realize how God sees us, the more we will want to obey Him and to become our true selves.

One writer puts it like this,

“

We are never free until we submit our hearts and minds in obedience to Christ, and we are never so much our true selves as when becoming more like him.”



Who am I and what difference does it make?



Most people realize that there is a gap between who they are, and what they could be. There is a chasm between the way we know the world should be, and the way it is.

For Christians, this is not just “the way things are”, but the sign that our real condition is a longing to be restored to our true selves.

The Bible reveals how God originally intended us to know who we are and to live in that freedom. The story of Adam and Eve describes how God put His imprint on us.

He made us for Himself as covenant-partners. (As we have seen, a covenant is an agreement that establishes a relationship between two parties. In a covenant we say to each other, “Who I am and what I have I give to you.” Marriage is one of the few covenant relationships that still exist.)

So our original identity is found in God’s covenant with us. Yet the story of Adam and Eve also describes a profound reality – that as human beings we often don’t accept God’s covenant and instead place ourselves at the centre of life. (This is the root of sin).

The result is that we lose the sense of identity and have been searching for it ever since. We cannot find it ourselves – though we may try.

Yet because God is love, and He cannot be untrue to who He is, the story of the Bible reveals how He continues to make covenants with His people at various times, and in various ways.

The problem was that these Old Testament covenants failed to recover the identity-producing relationship God had with Adam and Eve in the garden.

So God promises a new covenant through Christ, which, if we can receive it, restores our identity completely.



What is the effect of my identity in Christ in my daily discipleship?



Our true identity is restored to us by being “in Christ”. While human beings fell from our original covenant identity, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, ‘If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.’

The result is that in this final covenant everything that is true of Christ becomes true of us. In the same way that the children in the Narnia books are made kings and queens, and then start to grow into that identity, so as disciples we are crowned with our identity in Christ, and then invited to respond. Among other things, in my daily life, I can have two things:

Restored confidence in obeying.

One of the reasons I respond to God is because although I am not divine like Jesus, because I share in the same restored identity revealed in Jesus I do things “in His name” – authorised as a covenant-partner to act on His behalf.

This gives me an incredible dignity and motivation.

Pete Greig puts it like this:

“

I am no longer sitting in a world of troubles looking up to God for help; rather, I am seated with Christ, looking down from the same vantage point He has.”

Restored desire to obey.

As you live into the identity God gives you as a disciple, there is a freedom in serving God, not out of a sense of duty, but out of love.

Paul described this by contrasting a fear-based slave mentality that comes from trying to please God in our own strength, with growing in our desire to God’s will as we realize our identity as His “adopted children”.

“You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry Abba father.”

