

Discipleship = Fully Mature in Christ

Colossians 1:21-29

September 8, 2019



Please read Colossians 1:21-29 before reading this transcript.

Today's message is going to be quite different than a normal sermon. Rather than just hearing from me, Pastor Jerry, you'll have the opportunity to hear from three other people on our staff as well. Together, the four of us, will all be talking about ONE MAIN THING: DISCIPLESHIP. The reason we are talking about this ONE MAIN THING, is that it is THE ONE MAIN THING for Christ-followers. At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he left His followers with one, clear and vital mission, "The Great Commission." In Matthew 28:19 Jesus said,¹ "Therefore go and make disciples..."² Those two words, "make disciples" are the main verb in verses 19-20. And this verb is an imperative.³ In other words, DISCIPLESHIP is a command. So, "what is Discipleship?" I'm glad that you asked! (Discipleship is... a boat... filled with disciples!) More seriously, today I have a 3-part answer: The first part of the answer is the definition of the word.⁴

1. DISCIPLESHIP is a journey of following Jesus & learning from Him. After all, that's what a disciple is, a follower, a learner or student of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul talks about DISCIPLESHIP this way in Colossians 1:28, "He (Jesus) is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." That's the 2nd part of our answer:

2. DISCIPLESHIP is presenting everyone, "Fully Mature in Christ." So we are not trying to build a fan base for Jesus; to try and just make Him popular. It's not that we just like Him a lot. This is something way beyond following Jesus on Twitter or liking His posts on Instagram. We are striving to become fully devoted followers who help others become fully devoted followers. We are called to present... everyone... fully mature... in Christ. That's where you and I come in to play. In fact, that's where our church comes in to play, as well. This is the 3rd part of the answer to the question, "What is discipleship?"

3. DISCIPLESHIP is the mission of Efree Bemidji. My heart for our church is that we would be laser-focused on Discipleship. That this would be our "ONE MAIN THING," our "Big Mac" or our "Whopper," if you will. It's WHY we are here as a church and it's the DISTINCTIVE for which we should be known. One could say that DISCIPLESHIP should be understood as the "Operating System" on which all of our church "programs" run. So, for example, if you use a Windows PC, you probably use Microsoft Windows 10 to run programs like Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc. Or, if you use an Apple computer, you probably use macOS to run programs like Safari, iTunes, iMovie, etc. Here's the point: as a church, the operating system that we should be using is Discipleship. We should run all of our various ministry programs on it. This includes everything from our women's ministry to our men's ministry. From our young adult ministry to our older adult ministry. And so on. So, whatever ministry area we serve in, let's all think through a "Discipleship Lens." Whether that's serving as an usher or greeter, cleaning or decorating the building, or teaching a class or whatever else it may be.⁵

¹ The authority that Jesus is speaking about in verse 18 reveals a turning point in human history. Many of you may recall that during Jesus' earthly ministry, he focused primarily on the Jewish people. That's why for example, earlier in Matthew 15:24, Jesus said to a Canaanite woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." This was an initial, short-term strategy. Now it broadens to ALL nations.

² D. A. Carson summarizes it well, "In the Greek, "go" – like "baptizing" and "teaching" – is a participle. Only the verb "make disciples" ...is imperative." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 666.

³ Μαθητεύσατε literally "make learners." This is a 2nd person plural, imperative verb. The rest of the sentence uses participles, i.e. "go" "baptizing" and "teaching."

⁴ Discipleship is actually a somewhat difficult word to define. Discipleship is a noun. It's the process or life-journey of following and learning from Jesus Christ.

⁵ Our goal is to make sure that every ministry of our church has a connection to Discipleship. If there are things we are doing around here that don't have a solid connection to discipleship," then those things need to be re-evaluated. Whether it's our music, our teaching, our nursery, or our athletics, there needs to be some element of discipleship to it. Whatever retreats we attend, whatever Global Partners we support, and whatever budget line-items we approve. ALL OF IT, should be aligned with the gospel of Jesus Christ and helping people grow as His followers.

This morning, we are going to zero-in, on how we, as a church, are intentionally discipling the different generations. To help me do this, I'm going to invite three people from our Staff Ministry Team to join me up here. Let's start with some introductions. Here are some pictures:



Albin Sterneman
Youth/Young Adults Pastor
(& Annelise)



Gerri Thorsgard
Kids Ministry Director
(& Eric & kids)



Eric Nygren
Associate Pastor
(& Lindsay & kids)



Jerry Johnson
Lead Pastor
(& Debbie & kids)

As Ministry Leaders, we've been talking about Discipleship a lot lately. Let's each share our perspective on how our particular ministry area fits into our church's overall Discipleship mission. I've got 3 questions for us to run through together.

Question #1: How does your particular ministry area fit into our Discipleship mission?

Gerri: Right away my response to that question is - Discipleship of children is commanded by God – Deuteronomy 6:6-9 says, “These commands that I give you today are to be on your hearts – Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of you houses and your gates.” This isn't a suggestion – this is a command that God is making to parents, to the Israelite nation and to us as a church. When God says impress them on your children – this means discipling and teaching your own children. This is the purpose of E Free Kids Ministry, it's to build a strong foundation on the truth of God's word and to partner with families in leading kids to Christ. I love that our church takes discipleship of all ages seriously, they prioritize children and I get the privilege to partner with families and kids in that process.

Albin: In our student ministry, we stand on two things, being Jesus centered and biblically driven. This can be broken down to truth and love. Standing on God's truth through the Bible and what His Word says is crucial for students in today's schools and world. But you cannot just have truth, you have to have God's love that starts with Jesus. He loved us; therefore, we love because he first loved us. Our students here in our church learn from their leaders and others that discipleship is following Jesus 24/7 even when it's hard or their peers sway other ways. We do this by keeping him at the center and using the Bible to guide our conversations and thoughts. We see it as a cup that is filled with an inflow and then overflows into others, through studying God's Word, worshiping Him, praying and talking to Him and loving God and others.

Eric: No matter what stage of life we're in as adults, we know that there are many things in life, even good things, that compete for our attention each week. Unfortunately, opportunities to grow in discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ often get squeezed out of an already busy week. We want to help our adults connect in ways that intentionally foster discipleship growth. We don't want to put more on your plate, we want to put better things on your plate, things that will help you to become who Jesus calls you to be as his disciple. And we are intentionally offering our adults a “simplified

menu.” There are many ways to plug in, to serve, and to grow here at our church, but there are two particular items “on the menu” that I think best help to foster discipleship growth. Formation Groups meet Sundays at 9:45 am. These are designed to help us consider together how the gospel forms our thinking, our priorities, and our relationships. These discussions last for six weeks and are focused on a particular topic. We will start these up again next Sunday along with our existing adult Sunday School classes. Life Groups are the new thing on the menu, something that I’ve been looking forward to launching for a while now. Life Groups are opportunities for our adults to meet as a small group during the week for discipleship growth. These groups are designed to be a place where we can learn together and love one another. Each week our Life Groups are going to discuss the weekly sermon in a way that helps us move from hearing the message to personal application. You will have an opportunity after the service today to sign up for a Life Group.

Jerry: As I preach, I really want the sermons to be relevant to everyday life and everyday struggles. I want them to connect to our daily discipleship. Therefore, I am very excited to provide sermon-based discussion questions each week for our new Life Groups. I hope these will help people not only learn information but actually live it out as followers of Christ.

Question #2: How do you see your Discipleship ministry connecting with Scripture?

Gerri: My verse comes from Matthew 16:26, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” The reason I connect this to Kids Ministry may be because I am coming off the heels of our PowerUp VBS and experienced many grandparents who registered and faithfully committed to bringing their grandkids to those 4 days. We don’t want to end up in eternity without the next generation, our kids, our grandkids. We have work to do and...the time is short, by the age of 9 most moral and spiritual foundations of a child are in place. Let’s not forfeit eternity for fleeting pleasures or crowded and over-extended schedules. As Pastor Eric has said, be a disciple and choose the better options for your family and the next generation.

Albin: God’s Word is so immensely powerful and can speak into any situation. Paul writes to the people in Ephesus that, “...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. (4:15) Students are maturing in their own lives. They are going to grow up in a world that is telling them so many truths but when we speak THE truth in love and keep Jesus as our number one, they can mature in every respect into the body of Christ. They will be sitting where you are in the near future. We pray that they would speak the truth in love always.

Eric: When I think about the key verses of Scripture that speak to what Life Groups are all about, two come to mind. The first is the classic Great Commission passage found in Matthew 28:19-20 where we are commanded by the Lord Jesus to be disciple-makers. One of the key characteristics of discipleship is that we are to be learners. We’re not just to amass Bible knowledge, rather we are to grow in our knowledge of Christ and of God’s word in such a way that we are not only informed by it, we are also transformed as disciples. But we are never meant to do this alone. We are to learn together. And you can’t read the New Testament without seeing the call to love one another peppered throughout. John 13:35 says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (NIV). I am convinced that discipleship always flourishes in the context of relationships. Personal devotions and private worship are only part of the story. So if we are to obey both of these commands--and they are commands—then each of us needs to commit to being and making disciples, and to living out our discipleship in our relationships with one another.

Question #3: How would you specifically challenge us to as a church?

Albin: I would challenge us all to speak truth in love. You cannot have one without the other. Specifically, parents, grandparents and guardians. Speak truth into your students. The world wants to speak its truth but your kids need God’s truth. Another thing I would challenge all of us to do is pray

every Wednesday night at 6:30 for kid's club and youth group. Pray that God would work on our kids and students' hearts and pray for the many volunteers that are serving the next generation. Set an alarm on your phone, do it before dinner or whatever works best for you. We covet your prayers and know that God will use them in big ways.

Geri: I would challenge parents, grandparents, guardians to invest in the lives of your children - prioritize spiritual growth in your own lives and in your families. Make devotions & prayer with your kids and church a non-negotiable. Build spiritual habits in your own life that your own children visibly see and want to emulate. Never underestimate the influence you have on the spiritual lives of your kids. Make teaching them about God the norm in your family and make church a priority. Pray! Spend more time in prayer...

Eric: Don't just come to church. Prioritize your discipleship. Don't waste the opportunities that you have to foster your discipleship growth that we are providing you with. Engage in a Formation Group. Join a Life Group and make that one of your weekly discipleship priorities. Don't add more to your plate. Let us help you put better things on your plate.

Jerry: Thank you, each one of you, for sharing your hearts with us! Colossians 1:28 has really been resonating with me this past week or so. It reminds us of our mission: "He (Jesus) is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." This challenges us to answer 2 questions:

1. How are each of us maturing in our own, personal discipleship? Here are some ways to mature in your discipleship. Plug in to a small group. Connect with a Life Group, a Formation Group, a Sunday School class, a Bible Study, etc. Also, find a place to serve. Use the gifts that God has given you; steward your time/talent/treasure to make disciples. Don't just watch from the sidelines, get in the game! Another key thing is to commit to consistent Sunday attendance. Next week we are beginning our new sermon series on "Training Ourselves to be Godly." Make it a priority to be here. This is a 5-week series, try to be here all 5 Sundays: 5 for 5! Watch the service online if you have to be gone.⁶ The other challenge is this:

2. How can we help others mature in their discipleship?

There are so many ways we can do this. Here are just a few suggestions: Offer someone a ride. On Sunday or Wednesday, etc. Reach out to someone who has been gone for a while. Tell them we've missed them and ask them to join us again. Let's not allow anyone to slip through the cracks! Invite someone to join your small group. Tell your neighbors about our Kids Ministry or our Student Ministry or about our ministry for Senior Adults. Spread the word!

As our Lord and Savior, Jesus has every right to tell us what to do with our lives. He has told us to make disciples. But HOW? HOW are we, as mere humans, supposed to accomplish such a CHALLENGING mission, as the Great Commission?

The Apostle Paul tells us HOW in the verse immediately following Colossians 1:28. In verse 29 he says, "To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me." This echoes the same sentiment as the last words of the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus says, "...And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." He hasn't just left us to accomplish this mission on our own. He is with us and He is for us. We won't be able to do this on our own strength. We will need the energy of Christ working in us powerfully! On that note, I urge you to spend a few minutes in prayer. But don't just pray for the 4 of us who shared about Discipleship today. And, don't just pray for our entire staff team. In fact, don't even limit your prayers to the many volunteers who are serving in a particular ministry role. Instead, pray for every Christ-follower who is part of our church family. Pray for each and every single one of us. **Ask God to empower and equip and enable us to accomplish the DISCIPLESHIP mission to which Christ has called every Christian. Amen!**

⁶ <https://efcbemidji.org/watch-read/sermons/>

*This message was shared at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on September 8, 2019 by four members from our Staff Ministry Team:
Gerri Thorsgard and Pastors Albin Sterneman, Eric Nygren, and Jerry Johnson*