



# Discipleship

## Advent Study

### Day 1

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**Read: Matthew 28:19**

#### Introduction

Our study for Advent is the theme of Discipleship. Advent is a time for serious reflection on ultimate things. During this month we will be asking you to think about your call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

What is a disciple? How are we to understand the call and demands of discipleship in light of the gracious gift of new life given by God and not by works of our hands? Teachings on discipleship to people who have not received this good news will sound like mere words. For the sake of this series, here is our working definition of a disciple: A disciple is a person who has received the good news of Jesus Christ and who has made an intentional decision to follow him in a disciplined manner.

Notice three important words in this definition. First is the word “received.” We must always remember that the invitation to follow Jesus Christ as his disciple is his initiative. We receive it as good news, God’s grace and gift. We cannot earn it or make ourselves worthy of it. Second is the word “intentional.” We must respond to his invitation and follow him to learn of him. Third is the word “disciplined.” The Christian life is one to be led in a disciplined way. This means that it is not by whim or when it is convenient, but at all times and in all places.

*R&D Have you heard Jesus’ call and are you following him in an intentional way?*

*Prayer: May we recognize that among Christians, Lord Christ, disciples are not a special class of followers; we are all called to be your disciples.*

### Day 2

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**Read: Mark 1:14-20**

#### Called

Much is written today about spiritual awakening. There is a growing concern, especially among mainline churches, with decreasing membership. Yet, the New Testament has little to say about “church members.” Even the word evangelism is seldom found in Scripture. The New Testament has a great deal to say about discipleship. For example, the great commission according to Matthew is to “go and make disciples.”

Jesus began his ministry by calling people to follow him. To this call he added a promise, “I will make you fishers of men.” The first disciples were not theologians, pastors, or religious leaders. They were ordinary men and women. It seemed Jesus’ intention to build his Church using such people.

Today we meet four people, Simon, Andrew, James, and John who accepted this invitation and immediately left their daily responsibilities and followed after him. They put this before all else. Their actions could be seen in worldly terms as irresponsible, but now we know that they were the first to make the Messiah first in their lives.

R&D *Have you made the call to follow Jesus the first priority of your life? Explain.*

Prayer: *Jesus Christ is life. Everything else is just details.*

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### Day 3

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**Read: John 1:43-47**

#### Call of Philip and Nathanael

Jesus called Philip and he immediately went to Nathanael. Nathanael is skeptical of Philip's claim to have found the Messiah. Yet, he accepts Philip's invitation to come and see.

The encounter between Jesus and Nathanael reveals Nathanael as a true seeker who holds no falsehood. Nathanael responds to Jesus' foreknowledge of him by affirming Jesus' messiahship. These words lead to an amazing statement by Jesus. He promises that Nathanael "shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

The disciples did literally see the messengers of God (that is what the word "angel" means) communicating with Jesus, but the passage means more. It promises that to those who earnestly seek after him, we will see the divine nature of Jesus revealed in extraordinary ways.

No one can know Jesus Christ fully until he or she has made a decision to follow him. Faith in him reveals more to us than knowledge about him can. One of the disciples of Jesus who had a profound effect upon me was an elderly grandmother in my first church who had only a fourth-grade education. In her daily life, she modeled a closeness to Jesus that I still long for and seek. Her knowledge of Jesus was vastly superior to that of many theologians whom I had met in seminary. How is this possible? Because, faith in Jesus is the prerequisite for truly knowing him.

R&D *Who is the person who has best modeled for you a relationship to Jesus Christ?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for those you have led to me to help me grow as your disciple.*

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### Day 4

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**Read: Matthew 9:9**

#### The Call of Matthew

Matthew was a tax collector. In the Roman Empire, tax collectors bid for the legal right to collect taxes. They received a percentage of the receipts they could collect. The more efficient they were at collecting taxes, the more their income.

It is one thing to have to pay taxes to the Romans, but Jews found themselves having to pay taxes to their own people. Such lackeys were seen as turncoats, traitors to their own people. They were hated by the common people and were the targets of zealots.

Matthew probably had a good justification for his work. For example, someone had to do it, why not him? His income and social standing among the Romans could have offset the rejection he found among his people, but he was an outcast listed with publicans, sinners, and tax collectors.

It was from his work that Jesus called him. Jesus made no prior condition to the call. His call of Matthew probably did not sit well with the other disciples. In the call of Matthew, two principles of God's grace are shown.

First, Matthew was called right where he was. That is where we are called. God starts with us right where we are. Second, God's grace is extended to Matthew just as it was to Peter, James,

and John. God is no respecter of people. He loves each person. He loves the fisherman, the tax collector, and the housewife equally.

R&D *How have you experienced God's grace and acceptance?*

Prayer: *Truly you want us, Lord Jesus, to bloom where we are planted.*

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## Day 5

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**Read: Matthew 9:10-13**

### Restoration of Matthew

Matthew's call and his acceptance also restored him to his community. He was reunited with fellow Jews who before his call held him in contempt. Isn't it amazing whom Jesus was willing to call? His disciples numbered men who without Jesus would have hated one another.

Our call to discipleship is like that. We often find that our call to follow Jesus brings us into relationship with people we dislike.

Once I met a couple who were looking for a church. They had lived in our city for five years but were unable to find a church that met their expectations. After listening to their account of their doctrinal purity, I realized that they could never find a church with people in it who met their standards. They wanted perfection. I ended the conversation with this challenge: "If you find a church that suites you, I hope you will not join it!" They were surprised by my comment, but I went on to explain. "If you do find the perfect church and you join it, you will spoil it."

I knew that our congregation was made up of people like Matthew—people I would not choose to like. I loved them, however, because I was related to them through a common Savior and a common call. In the family of God, just like our own family, we don't get to choose our brothers and sisters.

R&D *Who are the Matthews in your life?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, that our congregation is made up of a variety of people I might not know if they were not my brothers and sisters in Christ.*

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## Day 6

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**Read: Mark 10:17-22**

### Sacrifice for Discipleship

Today's Scripture presents us with one of the most demanding aspects of discipleship. The rich young ruler came earnestly desiring to know how to obtain eternal life. His answer to Jesus reflects someone trying to do what is right. Why did Jesus demand from this man something he seemingly had not demanded from others?

It could be that Jesus perceived in this person's manner and behavior that he was rich. Jesus knew that possessions could be the chief obstacles to following him. He required a sacrifice from the young man that suggested a single-mindedness and determination.

In the story we are told that he turned away because he was very wealthy. Although this man was seeking spiritual life, he could not see how his possessions kept him from the next step. Jesus' request was one of love. He wanted the best for the man. He was saddened by his inability to respond.

This example shows us the importance of not only putting our relationship with Jesus first, but of surrendering everything that would compete with that relationship. Jesus may not ask us to literally “sell all we have and give it to the poor.” Yet we can be certain that following him means that we should be willing to surrender all that we have to put him first.

Before Jesus needs to demand this of us, we can examine our own lives. Are there things that separate us from Christ or compete for his central role in our lives?

R&D *Is there anything keeping you from a wholehearted commitment to follow Christ? Explain.*

Prayer: *Protect me, Blessed Lord, from anything that would interfere with my relationship with you.*

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## Day 7

**Read: Luke 14:15-33**

### Count the Cost

While Jesus called people to walk with him as disciples, today we are confronted with his response to those who wanted to volunteer. He warns them to count the cost.

Years ago, I learned a method for sharing my faith with others. We call this evangelism. I discovered that, using the method suggested, I could lead a person easily to a prayer of commitment to Christ. Soon I began to notice that only a very few of the people who would read this prayer would show any real sign of having made a commitment. When I went back to Scripture, I found that the method that I had learned was faulty. Jesus did not make the call to follow him an easy method to which anyone could respond. Jesus demanded that a person “count the cost.”

I tried this. I still used the method, but when a person responded easily, I ended by suggesting that the person not say the prayer unless he or she were willing to count the cost of this decision. Now people responded differently. Many said that they needed to “think about this decision.” A few seemed immediately ready, and, not surprisingly, they seemed to act on their decision.

The Church needs to follow the example of Jesus and avoid any method that promises easy decisions. The road of following Jesus is often a hard one. It will demand everything of us. We, too, are to count the cost.

R&D *To what extent are you willing to pay the price of discipleship?*

Prayer: *Help me to reflect back to on life to see if I am showing signs of a disciple, Blessed Jesus.*

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## Day 8

**Read: John 8:1-11**

### Unconditional Forgiveness

In contrast to the last two lessons in which we looked at the cost and the demands of the decision to follow Christ, today we look at forgiveness.

The story of the woman taken in adultery is a story of unconditional forgiveness. We have heard it so often as Christians that its impact is sometimes lost. We need to remember that the original audience that heard this story would have identified with the crowd. They would have been struck by Jesus’ quickness to forgive. They would have demanded justice.

The point of this story for the early Church and for us is that no matter how horrendous the crime, Jesus offers to us a way of forgiveness. It is the power of this forgiveness that gives freedom

from our sins and from the past. The woman who received this forgiveness made a decision to follow Jesus.

She had two reasons to do this. First, the forgiveness that was offered unconditionally freed her to make such a decision. Second, having received such love and forgiveness from this rabbi, she wanted to be a part of his life. There are really only two things that all disciples share in common. We are all sinners who have received Christ's forgiveness. We have the spirit of Jesus living in us, having received him as Savior and Lord of our life. Our life with our fellow disciples could be much more at peace and harmony if we all remembered these simple truths.

*R&D In what way are you aware of the depths of Christ's forgiveness given to you?*

*Prayer: You sacrificed yourself upon a cross to free us from sin and bring us into relationship with the Father, Lord Jesus. What more could anyone ask?*

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## Day 9

**Read: Matthew 5:1-10**

### The Sermon on the Mount

One of the major themes of the Gospel of Matthew is discipleship. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters are specific teachings on discipleship. For the next several days we will be looking at these teachings. They touch on the basic disciplines of the followers of Jesus.

"His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them." The scene here is one in which Jesus is teaching the disciples with the crowd listening in. It is important to remember that the Sermon on the Mount was intended for followers, not for a crowd.

The sermon begins with the beatitudes. In these Jesus promises a series of blessings to those who follow him. The spiritually poor will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Those who mourn will be comforted. The humble will inherit the earth. Those who thirst for God's righteousness will be filled. The merciful will receive mercy. The pure in heart will see God. Peacemakers will be called the children of God. Those persecuted will receive strength.

Often these sayings are viewed outside the realm of discipleship. Yet these are not promised to just anyone, but rather to those who have decided to follow Jesus. In the context of discipleship, these promises come to fulfillment. For example, Christians face mourning like anyone else. Yet when we mourn we have a "very real presence in times of trouble." We know that our loss is never the end, but rather Jesus is the end. Those who walk with him have this comfort.

*R&D How have you found the promises of the beatitudes true for yourself?*

*Prayer: Blessed are you, Lord Jesus, for giving us guidelines for life in you.*

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## Day 10

**Read: Matthew 5:11**

### The Promise of Persecution

The promises of the beatitudes end with the awesome recognition that persecution often follows disciples of Jesus. This recognition should give us sobering thought.

One theologian has suggested that the measurement of our commitment is actually the rejection and hatred we face because of our belief in Jesus. If this is so, am I really following?

A young woman I know was totally rejected by her family for becoming a believer in Jesus. A young man in his twenties was rejected by his fiancé's family when they found that he was a believer. They considered him a fanatic. A successful executive who was a member of my parish was shunned for a promotion because his beliefs as a Christian were in tension with his boss' objectives.

We often think of persecution as something that ancient martyrs and long-distant missionaries face, but not us. Even in a society with great freedom such as ours, this is not true. Jesus did not want his followers to be naive. Disciples should know that giving God's kingdom ultimate priority in our lives will not make us popular with either the world or Satan.

*R&D To what extent are you prepared for the cost of discipleship, even if it is rejection and hatred?*

*Prayer: Prepare us, Dear Jesus, to face whatever may be ahead of us as we follow you.*

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## Day 11

**Read: Matthew 5:43-48**

### Love Our Enemies

Yesterday we saw that Jesus taught that his disciples would face rejection. Today we contrast this with his teaching on loving our enemies.

As a disciple, I must face the fact that I have enemies. Yet, as a disciple, I am to have no enemies. I am to love those who hate and reject me. Our example in this, of course, is Jesus himself who prayed that his Father would forgive even those who put him to death.

The promise that we have is that God's love can overcome any enemy. It has the power to turn around the worst that can be thrown at us to accomplish God's end. The apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, started as one who hated and persecuted the followers of the Way.

There is a further truth to this. Early in our journey with Christ it is tempting to see others, especially nominal church members, as the enemy. True followers of Christ, however, have no enemies. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of hatred and dislike of others. We must remember that today's perceived enemy may be tomorrow's brother or sister in Christ. How do we find the strength to love others in this way? We find it in the closeness of our journey with Jesus. Close to him, we find hatred hard. Near him we find strength to love the unlovable.

*R&D Give an example of forgiving someone who hated or rejected you.*

*Prayer: The best way for us to love others, Lord Christ, is for you to love them through us.*

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## Day 12

**Read: Matthew 5:13-16**

### Salt and Light

The disciples of Jesus were called to a special mission. They were to be something unique in this world. Two images of this uniqueness that Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount were those of salt and light.

From a human perspective, we believe that the important people are those who are the movers and shakers of the world. We look to the superstars in politics, education, and even the entertainment world as the real trend setters. Yet, today's lesson tells us that things are very different from God's perspective.

Nothing illustrates this better during the season of Advent than that of the holy family. Mary and Joseph were common people. At the time of the birth of Jesus, it was Herod, Quirinius, and Caesar who were seen as the real powerbrokers. Yet, a humble couple responded to God's call and they are the people who we know really mattered.

Jesus taught his disciples that they were the real people of the world. They were the salt and the light. On them rested the future of humanity, of human destiny. A Christian couple raising their children, Christian businesspeople demonstrating honesty and integrity, a Christian single refusing to accept the standards of the world—these are the people who really matter!

R&D *In what ways are you living out being salt and light in your world?*

Prayer: *In a time when there are so many distractions in life, help us to keep our focus on what matters to you, Lord Christ.*

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### Day 13

**Read: Matthew 5:17-20**

#### Disciples and the Word

Today, we begin to look in the Sermon on the Mount at the ways Jesus taught that his disciples were to carry out the disciplines of discipleship. For the next several days we will be looking at these. Our relationship to Jesus is nurtured through basic things that we do. If we ignore these, our relationship to him suffers.

Jesus taught that he had come to fulfill the law and the prophets. Jesus had a high regard for the place of God's written word. He taught his disciples to have this regard also.

It is popular in mainline churches to make fun of or ridicule so-called "fundamentalists." Some church leaders also use the word "Biblicist" as a pejorative term. They fear a rigid kind of biblical literalism. Yet, what is the alternative they offer? Are we to treat God's Word written as simply one insightful book in looking at life's options?

The cure for the distorted use of Scripture is not to give Scripture little regard; it is just the opposite. It is to give the daily reading and reflection on Scripture a central part in our discipline as a follower of Christ. The character, nature, and plan of God is revealed in Scripture. Jesus is presented and proclaimed through the pages of Scripture. It is in the words of Scripture that the transformation of our world begins.

R&D *In what ways are God's words becoming a consistent part of your world?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, that in our day we have access to Scripture we can read and understand and commentaries such as this one that can further enlighten us.*

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### Day 14

**Read: Matthew 5:21-30**

#### Matters of the Heart

Murder and adultery, hatred and lust, these Jesus taught his disciples are matters of the heart. Most of our actions are born out of our desires.

I once met a psychologist who criticized Jesus' teachings on these subjects. He said that it was better for people to think the thoughts, but not act on them. For example, pornography helped people keep from acting out sexually, he contended. Christians had it wrong; we should measure

only the effects of behavior on other people. He contended that this was the only measure for morality.

Of course, in one sense he was right. He was right that when a person murders another, the consequences to the other are more serious than when a person only thinks hateful thoughts.

Yet, we know that this position is too simple. Jesus knew that it was from the heart, the center of desire, that evil comes. He dealt with his disciples by pointing to their inner lives first. Most especially, we should see that Jesus had the soul of the person, not its effects on others, as the subject in this lesson.

He knew that hidden thoughts of hatred and lust are like emotional and spiritual cancers that can erode our spiritual lives. He knew that outward purity would flow from inner holiness. As disciples we are to have the desire for inner holiness.

*R&D Is being holy a growing desire in your journey with Jesus?*

*Prayer: We want you in our heart of hearts, Lord Christ, where your Holy Spirit dwells to guide us on the path you have set before us as your disciples.*

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## Day 15

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**Read: Matthew 5:33-42**

### Simplicity of Life

Today's lesson on discipleship points to the value of simplicity. In the first example that Jesus gives involving oaths, he charges his disciples to learn the value of straight talk.

The second example deals with motivation. Even our motivations are to have a simple core: the desire to do good for others. This means the giving up of the old nature of demanding retribution and vengeance. Our motives and words are to be rooted in simplicity and straight-forwardness.

An astounding thing about the apostle Paul was the number of times that he could say, "My conscience is clear." As a disciple of Jesus, he had learned the value of examining his motivation. When his integrity was challenged, he did not have to become too introspective. He knew why he did the things he did.

A dear friend of mine told me once that he had learned the value of "keeping short accounts" with God and with other people. "If I do something wrong, I try to deal with it immediately." My friend taught me the value of keeping a simple and straightforward life.

*R&D To what extent are you keeping track of your motives, especially in relationship with others?*

*Prayer: Lord God, the joy of this life in Christ motivates me to keep short accounts with You so that I don't allow myself to wander off track.*

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## Day 16

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**Read: Matthew 6:1-4**

### Giving

Over the next four days, we will look at three key disciplines: giving, praying, and fasting. In looking at these, we should note that Jesus uses an important phrase to introduce each topic, "When you..." Jesus does not begin by saying, "If you..." In today's reading, he says "When you give..." The operating assumption here is that giving (as well as praying and fasting) is a normal part of discipleship.



Jesus contrasts a disciple's giving with that of "the hypocrites" who give as a show before other people. True giving to the needy should be done secretly, as though the left hand would not know what the right hand is doing.

This lesson teaches us at least one important principle. True giving to the needy, as opposed to the hypocritical kind, is based on concern for the needy, not on what recognition we get from it.

When I worked as a chaplain in a children's hospital, I would watch the troop of celebrities who would come through at Christmas time. While the cameras were rolling, these folks presented themselves as generous, caring, and concerned people. Since I never saw any of these people the other eleven months of the year, I grew callous to their staged compassion. Most painful was that the children could see right through this hypocrisy.

Second, people who do such things receive, as Jesus taught, "their reward." They do not receive God's reward. We know that someday the hearts (motivations) of all people will be revealed.

*R&D In what ways are you practicing a Christlike discipline of giving to the needy?*

*Prayer: Lord God, all we have is from Your hand. Thank You for letting us share it with others in need.*

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## Day 17

**Read: Matthew 6:5-8**

### Prayer

Again, we see "when you pray," not "if you pray." Presuming that his disciples would be regular in prayer, Jesus now gives the same warning he had offered on giving. Prayer is not to be done for outward show, but secretly, quietly, directed to God.

I once took a whole semester class on the subject of prayer. The professor, a scholar and monk, defined prayer in this way: "Prayer is engagement with life and encounter with ultimate reality."

Working with the above definition, we spent three months exploring every intellectual avenue in understanding prayer. One thing we did not do. We did not pray.

It was as though we had spent an entire semester studying love poetry but had never read a poem. No wonder that many of my fellow classmates and I found the class a complete frustration.

Yet often we Christians approach prayer in the same way. We think that prayer is something that must first be intellectually understood before we can do it. Actually, prayer must be done to understand it intellectually. So where do we go to begin? I have found it best to go to a person who prays—whose prayer life speaks to me. As a priest, I learned my first and best lessons in prayer from a construction worker. As I got with him for prayer, I learned how to open my heart, every aspect of it, to God.

*R&D How have you learned to develop your vital life of prayer?*

*Prayer: Lord, teach us to pray.*

## Day 18

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**Read: Matthew 6:9-15**

### “Our Father”

As an example of how to pray, Jesus now teaches his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. For the sake of our study in discipleship, we should note three things. First, obviously, this is not the Lord’s prayer at all, but the disciple’s prayer. Each clause of this prayer speaks to the ongoing needs of a disciple. Volumes have been written on this prayer. Some scholars believe this was intended as a liturgical prayer, almost complete in the form we now have it. Other scholars believe this is an outline of how to pray that has become over the years a liturgical prayer. In either case, it survives because it so directly conveys the hearts of those who truly desire to be a disciple.

Second, the prayer is purposefully intimate. It begins, “Our Father.” I once asked a group of children during a children’s sermon, “What is prayer?” One five-year-old girl responded, “That’s easy! Prayer is talking with God.” “Do you talk with God?” I gently asked. “Sometimes,” she replied, “mainly I listen.” What a refreshing insight from this child. She had Jesus’ main ingredient for prayer, intimacy with God.

Third, this passage ends with a stern warning about the importance of forgiveness. A truly prayerful heart is first a penitent heart. We approach prayer with the Father with a serious recognition of His forgiveness. This attitude is to spill out into every other relationship we have.

*R&D What is your regular discipline of creating intimacy with God in prayer?*

*Prayer: Lord God, we thank You that You are an accessible God, at least as desirous of Your contact with us as we are with You.*

## Day 19

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**Read: Matthew 6:16-18**

### Fasting

“When you fast,” Jesus now says. In this passage fasting is treated equally with prayer and giving. I believe it safe to say that few of us treat it as equally important as the other two topics.

Yet, Jesus again does not say, “If we fast.” He seems to presume that fasting would be an important part of the disciple’s life. On one occasion, when the disciples were unsuccessful in casting out a demon, Jesus pointed out that more “prayer and fasting” were needed.

A most helpful book on this subject is Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. This book contains an excellent overview of the place of fasting in the life of a Christian as well as practical guidelines on how to get started.

The best reminder of the importance of this discipline is that Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. Apparently from this story we learn that fasting brought Jesus through a time of testing to a clear recognition of his calling.

Why does fasting seem such a key to deeper spiritual power? Part of the answer probably lies in our constant need for food. The decision to abstain from food for some set period is a clear reminder that human beings do not live “by bread alone.”

*R&D What role does fasting have in your discipleship?*

*Prayer: Lord, I’m reminded that, when fasting from food is not available to us for health reasons, we can fast from other things as well, denying ourselves in other ways to bring us closer to You.*

## Day 20

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**Read: Matthew 7:24-29**

### Build on a Rock

The Sermon on the Mount, which we have seen as teachings on discipleship, ends with the analogy of building on a rock as opposed to building on sand. Jesus introduces this summary with the words, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice....” Many scholars believe that this last teaching is the summary of Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7. How are we to build on such a rock?

First, we need to see that being a disciple involves an intentional discipline. Too often being a Christian comes to mean “when I get around to thinking about it.” If we are honest about it, we would have to admit that the Christian Church is filled with many baptized Christians, fewer believing Christians, and very few practicing disciples. Yet we have also seen that the power for discipleship comes through this intentional life.

G. K Chesterton once said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found hard and therefore not tried.” No discipline is easy. What do the disciplines we have studied do for us?

Being an intentional disciple brings us into greater and greater intimacy with Jesus and his ways. This leads us into a deeper knowledge and love of the Father. The disciplines of the Christian life are not works that give us special privilege before God; they are acts to bring us into deeper relationship with God.

Intimacy with Jesus and the Father is the key ingredient of the Christian life. It is the true mark of growth as a disciple. How about us? At this point in our study of discipleship, how are we growing in intimacy with God?

*R&D What are the disciplines that have led you more closely in intimacy with God?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, what we love to do, we do. May we better show our love for you by a discipline of discipleship.*

## Day 21

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**Read: Matthew 9:35—10:1**

### Walking as Jesus Walked

In our last series of lessons on discipleship, we will use the analogy of “walking” as an example of discipleship. After all, the disciples were invited to “follow” Jesus. This meant that they actually followed him day by day, learning of him and from him.

Today’s lesson asks us to look at walking with the compassion Jesus had. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

In this context Jesus invites the disciples to prayer because the workers are few. This passage is quoted often, but few note what Jesus does next. He called the twelve to himself, gave them authority and sent them out! He sent them out to minister as he had ministered in his compassion for the lost.

There is a story that when Jesus arrived in heaven after his resurrection an angel asked him how his message was to be taken to the ends of the earth. “I have left my disciples,” Jesus replies. The angel is struck that Jesus has left such an important task in the hands of sinful people. “What

is your alternate plan?” the angel asks. “I have no alternate plan!” the Lord replied. “Either they will go in my name or they won’t.”

There is no one else to walk this earth like Jesus except those whom he has called to himself, his disciples. The great news is that he has given us the authority and power to do this.

*R&D In what ways have you felt Jesus’ authority and power to minister his compassion?*

*Prayer: Embolden us, Lord Christ, to take your message to a very needful world facing needs that can only be met in your name.*

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## Day 22

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**Read: Luke 2:1-20**

### Christmas Thoughts

There is a loveliness about the story of Christ’s nativity which time does not dim. Yet also, there is a realism for which we cannot have too big a place in our minds as we read. It is “in the bleak mid-winter” of tired, angry earth that the Christ is born. Carelessness and strife are the setting—Augustus far away issuing a decree and men moving to his bidding; Bethlehem filled with a bitter, clamorous crowd. Because Jesus Christ is the answer to man’s real, appalling need, he was born in the midst of it. In the stable, not upon the imperial throne, is a Savior, and peace.

The circumstances of the birth of Jesus defy all that the world would have expected of the coming of a Savior. God came in a baby! The King of kings was born in the humblest of circumstances and was cradled in a manger. The birth of the Savior was at first noticed only by humble people, like the shepherds, and by heaven.

Lowliness, openness to God’s will and directions, dependence on God are writ large on the shepherds’ faces as they watch. And they are not disappointed; for to them, and not to the great rulers of the earth like Augustus is God’s good news of the birth of the Savior given. This news is good news and joy for all the people only if they have the same dispositions as the shepherds.

That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. The only place where there was room for him was on a cross. He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it; and still his search—and his rejection—go on. (William Barclay)

*R&D Will this Christmas Season, for you, be a rebirth of commitment to discipleship?*

*Prayer: We pray fervently, Lord Christ, for peace on the earth and good will to all in your name.*

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## Day 23

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**Read: John 6:60-69**

### Facing Disillusionment

In our daily walk with Jesus, we will constantly face failure and disappointment. Often this leads us to disillusionment. We need to be honest about this aspect of the Christian life. It does no one good to pretend that being a disciple is always a mountaintop experience. How are we to deal with this failure and disappointment?

First, we need to remember that our failures at the disciplines of the Christian life do not remove us from God’s grace. God through Jesus has already decided to love us, even die for us. The disciplines of this life are intended to bring us into deeper relationship with Jesus and the

Father. When we fail, we are hurt, but our relationship with Jesus, which is based on his love for us, is not hurt.

Second, we need to remember that in this world failure is often the best teacher. Think of the child learning to walk or to talk. This child learns by constant and repetitive failure. Like a spiritual child, it is from failures that Jesus teaches us.

Third, we need to remember that disappointment often comes when we expect the wrong things. Often, we are tempted to give up. Today's lesson teaches us that the original disciples faced disillusionment. This is just as much a part of the Christian life as spiritual success.

When faced with times like these, perhaps the best we can admit is "Where else would we go?" In times like these we are faced often with accepting Jesus' lordship over us whether it works the way we want it to or not.

*R&D When were the times when you felt most disappointed with God?*

*Prayer: Help us, Lord, not to give up even when the path ahead is unclear to us.*

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## Day 24

**Read: Mark 8:31-38**

### Walking the Way of the Cross

To follow Jesus also means to face a cross as he faced one. Today's lesson shows clearly that we, as disciples, are to die to ourselves, to take up our cross—self-denial—and to follow him.

When the original disciples followed Jesus, they found that the road led to Calvary, to a cross. They walked with him, but they also resisted him. Jesus saw the way of self-denial as the way his Father had put before him. He saw it as his disciples' way also.

As we follow Jesus, we will find that there are many hopes, dreams, aspirations and desires that must die. These are not based on the Father's will for us, but on selfishness, and self-centeredness. The way of Jesus puts these to death.

It has become fashionable in some Christian circles to portray the Christian life as one of rewards. If we profess Jesus and follow him, we are told that he will bless us with riches and rewards. While there are many tangible blessings promised to believers, these are not the rewards of discipleship. The reward of discipleship is to become like Jesus, to share with him in life with the Father. There is only one place to find our finishing school as Christians: it is the cross. "No cross, no crown!"

*R&D To what extent are you willing to allow Jesus to show you what needs to die in your life?*

*Prayer: The crosses we face in life are as nothing compared to the one you faced for us, Lord Jesus, and we are grateful.*

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## Day 25

**Read: John 20:19-23**

### Resurrected Life

To walk with Jesus also means to walk in the power of the resurrection. When Jesus breathed on his disciples, it was a reenactment of God breathing the breath of life into Adam. This time it was Jesus giving to his disciples the breath of the resurrected life.

This life meant the forgiveness of their sins and the power to live a new life. It is a fact that the most consistent proof of the resurrected life of Jesus is the transformed life of his disciples.

The gospels are so honest about the disciples, their inability to understand Jesus' mission, their slowness to believe, their self-centeredness, that their change remains one of the greatest miracles of the New Testament.

What could have caused such a change? Clearly it is only the resurrection itself. And the resurrection of Jesus was not something that they merely witnessed. It was something that transformed them. This band of disbelieving, fearful, and cowardly people became an army that upset their whole world.

This resurrected life goes on too as others receive this forgiveness. The disciples shared this new life with everyone they met. One of my early Bible teachers was a man who had been a drug addict in New York City for over twenty years. One day he was introduced to Jesus by a disciple. In one moment of prayer, he experienced a complete personality transformation. It was as though new life had been breathed into him.

*R&D How have you most experienced the new life in Christ as a transforming power in your life?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, you sent your Holy Spirit into the lives of the early disciples and you do the same for us today, empowering us to serve those around us as you did when you were physically on earth.*

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## Day 26

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**Read: Acts 1:4-8**

### The Power to Witness

In our journey with Jesus, we also must walk as he walked "in the power of the Holy Spirit." This is the promise that he made to his disciples. He promised that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The result of this empowerment was that they would do the ministry he had done. They would share with him in the messianic ministry of Isaiah 61:1-3.

They would become his witnesses. They would witness in his power. So Jesus' disciples became by the power of the Holy Spirit his witnesses.

Truly this is what our journey with Jesus is to produce. We are to move from disciples to witnesses. The fruit of the disciplined life in Christ is effective witness to others. This witness is to be carried out by word and deed, by proclamation and acts of love.

No study of discipleship would be complete without realizing that disciples are made for ministry to the world.

*R&D In what ways have you been a witness for Christ in this past week?*

*Prayer: By the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit within us, Lord Christ, there is nothing on earth that can keep us from witnessing to your love.*

**Read: Matthew 28:16-20**

**Make Disciples**

We end our journey with Jesus with the words of the Great Commission. In doing so we should note three things.

First, we recognize again that Jesus has given authority to his disciples. We have been given authority. Second, we see that we are sent. “Go,” Jesus says. But where are we to go? To the broken world, is the answer. We are people sent to our world to witness to Jesus Christ and his redeeming love. We are people on a mission. Third, we are to make disciples. As a parish priest, I often wondered how I would know if I were doing my job? What signs would I see in the congregation’s life, what signs in individuals who were under my leadership? I finally came to realize that I would know we were about the Lord’s work when the disciples committed to me made other disciples. At first this was discouraging; very little of our congregation’s life focused on such work. Yet, having perceived what the end was to be, I and others set out to do it. We set out to teach others so that they could literally reproduce themselves.

Christians who commit themselves to this work are given a great promise: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” We have Jesus with us to do his work. We can have confidence that Jesus is in the business of making disciples and that we are a part of this plan.

R&D *How have you reproduced yourself as a disciple of Jesus?*

Prayer: *Lord, make me a go-forth type of disciple that I may do my share of making disciples for you!*

*by Kevin Martin*

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