

What Does The Bible Say About Discipling?

By Steve Saindon

The purpose of a disciple is to become like Christ in heart and lifestyle (Jn 14:12, Rom 8:29, 1Jn 2:3-6). Therefore, the purpose of discipling is to help someone to become like Jesus (Gal. 4:19). True disciples of Jesus are always striving to help others from the world to become followers of Christ and to help mature each other within the church (Matt 28:18-20). God disciplines us in many different ways. He is constantly discipling us through His Spirit (2Cor 3:17-18), through His sovereignty (Acts 17:24-28), through situations and sufferings (Rom 8:28-29, Heb 12:4-13), through the scriptures (Ps 19:7-11, 119:9-16, 28; 2Tim 3:16-17), and also through spiritual people (Prov 13:20, 27:17, Eph 4:11-16).

“People discipling people” is older than the Bible itself. Moses disciplined Joshua (Ex 24:13). Elijah trained up Elisha to be God's prophet (1Ki 19:19-21). Nathan was sent by God to disciple David after David's grievous sin with Bathsheba (2Sam 12:1). What has always been God's plan concerning discipling is still God's plan in the New Covenant (Col 3:16, Rom 15:14, 2Tim 2:2). God will always use spiritual people to help His people mature in Christ.

The Bible is very clear about the fact that EVERYONE NEEDS DISCIPLING. The scriptures say that our hearts are “deceitful” and hard to understand (Jer 17:9). Many times we cannot detect our own sin (Ps 36:2) and often we have no idea where we are really at spiritually (Rev 3:17). We need daily encouragement and some healthy accountability to change and become like Christ (Heb 3:12-13, 10:24-25). In the Bible we see that discipling is not to be passive. We are to “encourage one another daily” (Heb 3:13), to “go and make disciples” (Mt 28:18-20), to “edify, encourage, correct, warn and rebuke” (Col 1:28, 1Thess 5:14), and to “make sure no one has a sinful heart” (Heb 3:12, 12:15). God desires that we help, serve (Gal 5:13, 6:1-2), sharpen one another (Prov 27:17), and supply what is lacking in one another's faith (1Thess 3:10). There are numerous “one-another” passages which make it clear that we are to be deeply and daily involved in each other's lives. We will need many hours of training (Mk 4:34, 9:30) like the Apostles, to become full-grown in the Lord.

Discipling in the Bible occurred through groups (Mk 4:34, 9:30) and through one-on-one relationships (Jn 21:15-20). Jesus sent out His disciples two by two (Matt 10). Is this “assigned” discipling???? (It is definitely “assigned” evangelism). We have the freedom within our sectors and family groups to figure out what methods most effectively meet the needs of the individuals in the group. Whatever Biblical methods we choose should include every member so that everyone can get the training and encouragement they need.

What is most vital for effective discipling? Is it the structures or methods we use? These can help. However, what really makes or breaks discipling is whether or not we follow the principles of sincere love (Rom 12:9, 1Thess 2:6-12), true humility (Titus 3:2), modeling (1Tim 4:12, 1Pet 5:2-3) and willingness to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15, Prov 23:13, 27:5-6, 7). If we genuinely love someone like a new mother does her child, we will figure out how to take care of him or her. We will make mistakes but disciples will grow and thrive under devoted love. If true humility is in place, then the leadership structure really isn't an issue (as long as it's Biblical). Everyone will be eager to help, easy to work with (Heb 13:7), respectful, forgiving and approachable. Modeling is important because it puts the scriptures into everyday life. Someone who consistently sets an example as a disciple inspires others. His help is desired by the good-hearted. We all need other disciples in our lives that lovingly hold us to the truth. What would have happened if Jonathan was too self-focused to encourage David when he was struggling in his faith because of Saul's murderous intentions (1Sam 23:16)? Would David have survived spiritually? What would have happened if Nathan hadn't confronted David about Bathsheba (2 Sam 12)? Would David have repented on his own? It's very doubtful. Speaking the truth in love to one another is vital for spiritual growth. We are called, even commanded, to be our brother's keeper (Ez 33:1-11). Disciples left to themselves because of neglect or their own independence almost always experience very little spiritual growth (Prov 26:12, 29:15).

Discipling needs to be consistent to be effective. Again the Bible teaches that we need daily encouragement (Heb 3:13). The first century Christians met together daily to build each other up (Acts 2:42-47). Meeting together weekly and talking nearly every day seems to be the pattern we find in God's Word. Satan "talks" to us, tempts and entices us every day. It's very important that we consistently encourage one another in our daily battle with sin, selfishness and Satan. Sadly, the pattern that is too often seen in our churches is one of "crisis management." A disciple goes along without sufficient encouragement. Sin slowly seeps into his life. His heart drifts away almost imperceptibly until he begins to commit some "major" obvious sins. Alarmed, several disciples come to his aid but it's too late. Satan has captivated his heart again. If consistent and proactive discipling is practiced these situations can be largely avoided.

Since we are all called to imitate Jesus in every area of our lives there is always plenty to discuss in our discipling times. Some great questions would be:

"How is my walk with the Lord?"

"Do I feel close to God and trust Him?"

"Do I enjoy my relationship with Him?"

"Am I motivated by the cross and my heavenly reward?"

"How's my personal Bible study going?"

"Do I intellectually and emotionally understand grace?"

"What am I praying for?"

"Is my prayer life difficult and frustrating or strong and consistent?"

“How's my marriage going?”
“Am I an Eph 5 husband/wife?”
“How are the kids doing?”
“How am I developing their faith in God?”
“Where am I most like Jesus? Least like Jesus?”
“What are my greatest temptations... struggles... frustrations?”
“Am I handling these challenges like Christ would?”
“What are my dreams?”
“How can I serve in the church?” “In the family group?”
“Am I being a good steward of my (God's) finances?”
“How am I devoted to helping the poor?”
“Who am I reaching out to?”
“Who can I study the bible with?”
“How can I be more effective evangelistically?”
“Am I unified with everyone in the church?”

Special note: Is there any authority in discipling? It depends on what is meant by authority. The Bible does talk about people being in authority (Heb 13:17, 1Cor 16:15-16, 2Cor 13:10, 1Thess 5:12-13). Elders and evangelists are called by God to be the servant leaders of the church (1Pet 5:1-3, Eph 4:11-16, 1Tim 5:17, Titus 2:15). Should the elder, evangelist or Christian discipler have a “boss-like” attitude? NO! (1Pet 5:1-3) It is the scriptures they preach which have the authority. This is why we need to get away from any humanistic discipling and use the scriptures often in our times together. Let people have the freedom to form their own opinions on issues that are not clear in the Bible. That is the freedom we have in Christ (Rom 14, 1Cor 16:12). However, if something is clear in the scriptures either by command or principle, we need to teach and expect obedience (2Thess 3:14-15, Matt 28:20, 2Cor 10:6). Jesus was so adamant about this that He even called us to obey raging hypocrites if they are calling us to follow the scriptures (Matt 23:1-4). The obvious conclusion is that the authority is in the message, not the messenger. In that sense, anyone has authority when they are correctly sharing the Word of God (2Tim 2:15). Let us humbly, not self-righteously, help each other to follow the true authority – God's perfect and powerful Word (Is 66:2, Ps 119:120, Ezra 9:4).

Biblical discipling is of God and is absolutely necessary for everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ. As our physical body is vitally connected, so we as Christians need to be connected to one another in spiritually nourishing relationships. Any part of our physical body that is severed quickly dies. This is also true in the spiritual realm (1Cor 12:14-27). When we follow the scriptural principles given to us our discipling relationships become a tremendous joy and help us to transform our characters to be like Jesus. Let us strive to make disciples and bring glory to our God (Jn 15:8).