

Message: Spiritual Infant or Adult?¹**What kind of disciple are you?**

I’m not asking about what you do. Each one of us has a call story that’s intertwined with our life story and they’re wonderful to hear. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here this morning, seeking to experience God’s presence. You wouldn’t care about worshipping or praising God. Our attitude is important indicator, but it’s not the only one.

I’m not asking about your daily faith walk. It’s an important part of following Christ and it reflects where our heart lies. It’s part of our discipleship and one of the indicators of discipleship, but our desire isn’t the whole story. Putting attitude and passion together gets closer.

I’m also not asking about how you serve God. That’s also a key indicator of spiritual maturity. By itself, behavior isn’t enough to show true spiritual maturity. But, combined with a God-first and a desire to become like Christ, our words and actions do demonstrate the nature of our discipleship. They are an indicator of our character. The apostle Paul shows us true character in Romans 1:16-17, “*I’m not ashamed of the gospel: it is God’s own power for salvation to all who have faith in God*” (CEB).

What kind of disciple are you?

What I’m asking about is your spiritual health and maturity. God isn’t impressed by the work that we do. Remember, God created everything and gave us work to do. God’s looking for us to react. God wants to know we hear the call, realize the enormity of what God has done for us, turn away from those things that distract us or lead us away from God, and love God in return. The greatest commandment Jesus gave is to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37). This is what lies at the heart of being a disciple.

Last week, we looked at the characteristics of discipleship as Jesus taught them in Matthew 4:19, “*Come! Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people*”. Discipleship involves every part of us: head,

¹ Much material in this sermon is drawn from DiscipleShift by Putman, Harrington and Coleman, Zondervan, 2013

heart and hands when we hear the call, are transformed and serve God and others in love. We’re “all in” as a brand new, whole person.

Why do we need to grow spiritually?

Spiritual growth is needed if the church is going to regain the power it once had to change society. Today, the church is filled with polite, powerless people who claim to follow Christ. However, let’s take a second to look at the morality and lifestyle of Christians versus non-Christians. In other words, how do the morals of Christians and those outside the church compare?

- Divorce rates are about the same.
- Percentage of men who regularly view pornography is the same – and it’s a lot of men.
- Christians are considered to be more than two times as likely to have racist attitudes as non-Christians.
- Domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and other problems are about the same.
- Only about half the people who say they regularly attend church actually do.
- 60-80% of young people will leave the church in their twenties.
- One in four people living together outside marriage call themselves evangelicals.

Rev. Bill Hybels, senior pastor at Willow Creek Church says this, “The local church is the hope of the world.”² What we do here, today, in our church, homes, neighborhoods and community can make a difference. We just have to reclaim the power we lost. We have to reclaim our discipleship. We have to grow up, spiritually!

This week, we’re going to look at how we grow spiritually when we’re a disciple of Christ. It all begins before we hear God’s call, as Romans 3:23 teaches, “*All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory.*” Before we know Christ, we’re spiritually dead. There’s no hope of life eternal in us. But, “*if we confess with our mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ and in our heart we have faith that God raised Jesus from the dead, we are saved*” (Romans 10:9). We are reborn spiritually. We are “born again.”

² *Discipleship*, p. 21

We all go through four stages of discipleship.

The stages are analogous to our growth and development from our early years to our later years. Each stage has specific characteristics:

- **Infant** – don’t know. We’re ignorant about Jesus, the Bible, the church and what it means to be a disciple.
- **Child** – all about ME. We’re self-centered, focused on our own needs and desires.
- **Young Adult** – Put others first. We’re God- and other-centered, looking for ways to serve God in ministry.
- **Parent** – intentional about our faith. We want guide others on their spiritual journey, releasing them to explore discipleship.

There are ways to tell when someone is demonstrating their spiritual maturity. We just have to listen to what they say! For example, when someone says: “God is dead” or “the Bible is a bunch of myths” or “religion is a crutch for the weak”, they’re **spiritually dead**.

Once someone has starts on their spiritual journey, there are indicators as well:

Spiritual infants might say: “I didn’t know the Bible said that” or “I don’t need anyone else. It’s just me and Jesus” or “My wife and I just came from church and got in a big fight on the way home. What’s up with all of that? I thought Jesus was supposed to take care of all our problems.”

Spiritual children may say things like: “I don’t know if this church/small group/pastor is meeting my needs anymore. Maybe I should go to another church” or “Don’t branch our small group into two. We won’t get to be with our friends” or “Why do we have to learn new songs? I didn’t like the music today” or “What doesn’t the church have a ministry for _____? This church must not care about _____.”

Spiritual young adults may say things like: “In my devotions, I came across something I have a question about” or “I really want to go on a mission trip this summer. I know I’m ready for it. I know God has big plans for my life” or “_____ and _____ missed church, so I called them to see if they’re okay. The kids have the flu, so maybe our group can take meals for them. I’ll start.”

Spiritual parents may say things like: “I want to help a co-worker. They asked me to explain the Bible. Pray for me as we spend time in God’s Word together” or “I wonder if God is leading me to invest in _____ and help him or her mature in faith” or “The most important discipleship is with my children. Will you hold me accountable to lead devotions with my kids on a daily basis? I get so busy that I’m not consistent with them.” We’ve all said things like this, haven’t we?

Where the analogy breaks down is with age. While children typically follow this pattern of spiritual, physical, mental and emotional growth, there are exceptions. And sadly, physical, mental and emotional maturity aren’t good indicators of spiritual maturity. People can be spiritually immature at any age. In addition, we can actually be spiritually mature in one aspect of our life, while still being spiritually immature in other dimensions of life.

A good example is the person who attends church regularly, reads their Bible daily, prays with their spouse, raises their children in the church, serves in women’s ministry, and yet won’t speak to a close family member for more than a year because of an argument. That person does all of the right things, and yet demonstrates a need to learn forgiveness.

We all battle the temptations of this world, those things that challenge us morally and spiritually. We’d rather have things our way (that me-first attitude is spiritually childish), rather than putting God and others first (young adulthood). In fact, the reality is that some of us may demonstrate characteristics that span all four of these stages. Pastors and those who serve the church full-time aren’t immune. We’re in the same struggle as each and every one of you.

There’s good news! Romans 8:14-15, *“All who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons and daughters. You didn’t receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”* Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to live inside of us when we’re reborn spiritually. Through God’s grace, we are sanctified, set aside and made holy by God’s Spirit for the work of the Church. By God’s grace, the Holy Spirit works inside of us, changing us a little bit at a time: first here

and then there, helping us to grow and mature. The goal is to become more like Christ. That’s the journey we’re on when we answer God’s call and follow Christ wholeheartedly.

One thing we are all called to do is to help others grow spiritually. That’s what it means to make disciples who make disciples. Of course, we have to be willing to stretch and grow, because we can’t teach or pass on what we don’t know. Those who are spiritually mature have a role in helping those who are less spiritually mature to grow. “We do this through sharing, connecting, ministering and disciple making. We share our life, new truth and our habits with those who are spiritual infants. We connect spiritual children to God, small groups and help them find a purpose. We train spiritual young adults in ministry, equipping them, providing ministry opportunities and releasing them to serve in ministry. And we release the spiritually mature to be disciple makers by explaining the discipleship process, helping them make disciples and then releasing them to make disciples on their own.”³

One caveat we need to note: there are “three parts to a person reaching spiritual maturity:

- **My part** – what I can do to help a person in their spiritual journey;
- **Their part** – the things a person is responsible for doing. If a person isn’t interested in growing, there’s really nothing you or I can do other than pray. Their will must be engaged and responsive. There must be a desire and hunger for change.
- **God’s part** – ultimately, there are things God alone is responsible for in helping people grow and develop spiritually. God is the one who transforms lives and brings lasting life change. We need to understand our part, learning to be patient and rest in God’s plan and timing while being alert to the opportunities God provides.”⁴

The responsibility for spiritual growth never rests on the disciple maker alone. We’re only responsible for our part and our own spiritual walk.

The last thought I want to leave you with this morning is the answer to the question: **How do we make disciples?** We’ve learned a lot about

³ *Ibid*, p. 60

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 59

the stages of discipleship and our part in making disciples. It's good to know, but what's most important is the most natural, human thing of all. **The best thing we can do to make disciples is to be in good, healthy relationships with other people.** People don't come to church because of social media, texts, email or web sites. Those forms of media may help, but people come and stay because of the one-on-one relationships they find and develop. We all know how to make friends, so we can all be part of growing and building our church together. The best news of all is that God made you just the way you are so you can connect with other people in the unique way you do. There's a reason we have four gospels: the writers all experienced Jesus in different ways and wrote from different perspectives.

So, are you ready? Are you willing to serve? Can you make friendships with others? Then let's dig deeper and stretch a bit more. Most of all, let's love God and follow the path of true discipleship, making disciples who make disciples.

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn't be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may serve others with that same love. Help us to share our faith and hope with others through love so they will join us in hope. We commit ourselves to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah 6:2-7 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Colossians 1:15-23 (NRSV)

{Jesus} is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him - provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.