

Discipleship: Helping Each Other Grow Like Christ

Pillars Sermon 3

Ephesians 4:11-16 | September 17, 2023

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See page 10 for small group discussion questions

Imagine a scene with me. Colored lights cut through a dark sanctuary, blazing across rows of worshipers with lifted hands. A layer of fog drifts across the stage as guitars sound. The pastor gives a riveting message, with stories to keep even the drowsiest congregant awake and chuckling. Following the service, the media team posts an Instagram reel summarizing the key points of the sermon. This is entertainment at its finest. And yet, somehow, Gen Z isn't impressed.

This is how Abigail Thompson, a college student and member of Generation Z herself, begins her award-winning essay, "Gen Z Needs a Place at Your Kitchen Table."¹ Abigail laments that only 28 percent of her generation, (those born between 1999-2012), say they're committed to attending religious services. More shocking, only 4 percent of her generation hold to a biblical worldview.²

Never has a generation been more invested in entertainment [she says]. Yet perhaps the constant current of entertainment that Gen Z lives beneath has left them waterlogged, even drowning. My generation is gasping for something real.³

Abigail goes on in her article to share that her own path into the church—rather than away from it—was marked not by entertainment, but relationships. She writes of one Sunday when an older couple invited her and three of her friends to their home for lunch. This couple had been missionaries in Kenya for 17 years. They sat around the dining room table for hours, sharing food, tea, and conversation about Jesus. It was this—the life of Jesus flowing through someone else—that grabbed her heart.

Here is the lesson I took from her article, and the point that takes me to our sermon today:

Jesus' method for building his church is not entertainment but discipleship.

Discipleship is where the power of Christ flows through personal relationships. Discipleship is where the truth about Christ is modeled in life, becoming not just true, but authentic, compelling, and beautiful. Entertainment is about impressing someone. Discipleship is about loving someone.

And the next generation (perhaps, all of us), has been entertained enough. We're soaked in fast, fluorescent, and often fickle digital connections. But we long for flesh and blood—what's real. And this is why we must revisit that ancient model of service and ministry that comes from the lips of Jesus: *discipleship*.

Jesus didn't call his followers Christians; he called them disciples. A disciple is a learner. But more in the sense of an apprentice than someone who sits in a class. Jesus' disciples devoted their lives to him, followed him, listened to him, and tried to imitate him.

Discipleship is where the dynamic power of God flows through personal relationships.

But discipleship was about more than Jesus' individual disciples learning from him and growing like him. If you were a disciple, you not only grew like Jesus, you helped others grow like Jesus. A disciple makes disciples. This is how Jesus put it, in his last words in Matthew:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).

A disciple makes disciples.

Here is how I'd define discipleship: The power of God working through personal relationships, where I grow like Christ as I help you grow like Christ.

How about you? Are you a disciple?

We want to be a church made up of disciples making disciples, not merely congregants who congregate. And as my old seminary professor, David Wells, wrote:

It is very easy to build churches in which seekers congregate; it is very hard to build churches in which biblical faith is maturing into genuine discipleships.⁴

What might it look like to foster a culture of discipleship at TFCA today? What might it look like to be that church that gives Generation Z—and so many others—a chance to meet Jesus at our dining room table?

We'll turn to Ephesians 4:11-16 to answer that question. You can see very quickly that this passage is about growing more like Christ and helping others do the same:

Rather, **speaking the truth in love**, we are to **grow up** in every way into him who is the head, **into Christ**, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (4:15-16).

Paul is calling these Christians to “grow up.... into Christ.” And he says that to do so, they must “speak the truth in love,” and that each part of the body (the church) must be involved: “when each part is working properly.” So here we have growing like Christ and helping others to do so.

There are so many great truths in this passage to help us understand discipleship. I am going to set forth six, each one briefly. Here are six truths about biblical discipleship that I hope we can live into.

1. You're already being disciplined

Paul does not give us a picture of people who are not being disciplined, and those who are. Rather, he shows us a world where you are *always being disciplined—led, guided, influenced*—by someone. He says we are to grow more like Christ (v 13),

so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes (4:14).

Our poets may say, “I am the captain of my soul,” but this simply is not the case. Life outside of the influence of Jesus is fraught with the influences of other forces.

From the accent of our voice to the way we behave, to how we see the world and value things, we are not ourselves by ourselves. Researchers have now long noted that from our earliest days, as infants, we learn by imitating others—how to smile, and how to talk. And for the rest of our lives, the people and culture surrounding us shape us.

So a first question: who, or what, is discipling you? What set of voices—what music, or university, or friend group, or ideology—will most shape how you think about God this week? Or think about life—what matters, what you should be living for?

You're already being disciplined—the question is, by whom, or what?

2. Discipleship flows through relationships, not just podcasts

There is much you can learn by reading a book or listening to a podcast on your own. And you can certainly relate to Christ on your own, through prayer. But Christianity is more like learning a craft, and you need much hands-on instruction and modeling to pick it up. Notice the communal atmosphere:

we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom **the whole body**, joined and held together **by every joint** with which it is equipped, **when each part is working properly**, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (4:15-16).

This is a picture of a church where the members are interrelating. The context of Christian growth is communal. And these are not distant relationships but personal. Discipleship happens through different types of personal relationships. Sometimes it's a mentor-mentee relationship, where someone further along in the faith helps a newer believer. Sometimes it's when two peers commit to walking side by side. Jesus called his disciples his friends. The Puritans used to speak of the power of "a special bosom friend," what today we might call an accountability partner or prayer partner.

Discipleship happens through different types of relationships.

This is our second truth:

Discipleship happens through Christian friendship—bonds between followers of Christ through which life and truth flow.

3. Discipleship involves helping your church grow, not just yourself

We tend to reduce growth to personal gains. Kids mark the growth of their height on the doorframe at home, college students by their GPA, businessmen by their job title. But notice what is growing in this passage. Not just individuals. Paul has in mind the development of the church:

we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the **whole body** ... when each part is working properly, **makes the body grow** so that it builds **itself** up in love (4:15-16).

It is the “whole body” that is growing up. This may frustrate some high performers, who don’t like the idea of being held back by people who aren’t as committed. But focusing on corporate growth actually is the key to Christian growth. Why? Because you are growing to be more like Jesus. And Jesus *loves* his church. He died for his church. The church is his bride. If you are becoming like Jesus, you’ll increasingly care about Jesus’ bride.

And it is simply that case, that God’s plan is to show His character through a people who love His Word, love Him, and love each other.

Are you thinking about how your church needs to grow? Are you hoping to help it grow this year? For members of TFCA, you might have noticed that our church does a good job with hospitality, vibrant worship, and making space to pastor children and youth. But you might wonder if we could grow in evangelism—in courage and strategy to introduce our neighbors to Jesus Christ. You might think we could grow in being less materialistic, or less earthly-minded.

This is our third truth: discipleship involves helping your local church grow to be more like Christ.

4. Discipleship requires teaching the Word

Fourth, discipleship requires teaching. Verse 15 reads,

speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (4:15).

“Speaking the truth,” means more than not lying. It means speaking the word of God. From its inception, Christianity was a faith rooted in a book—in a body of teaching known as Holy Scripture.

We saw this last week, in Acts 2, that the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching.” Jesus was called a teacher (a rabbi). When Luke addresses Theophilus at the opening of his Gospel, he says he wants his friend “to have certainty concerning the things [he’s] been taught (κατηχήθης)” (Luke 1:4), using the term *katecheo*, from which the church gets the word *catechesis*.

The context for teaching is the local church—its leaders and its well-equipped members.

As our passage shows, Christ gives gifts of leaders to the church: verse 11, And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers (4:11). These leaders then, verse 12, equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (4:12). And it is then part of the responsibility of each member of the church, “to speak the truth in love” (4:15).

People are not born into the world with the knowledge requisite for being a Christian. Disciples need to be taught. The church is God’s appointed place where authorized teachers teach the authorized Scriptures. Such teachers were charged to “guard the deposit” (2 Timothy 1:14) and “to teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). These teachers, moreover, are tasked to equip everyone to speak the truth of God’s word to each other.

This is why, at our church, we aim to preach sermons that carefully look at what the Bible says. This is called *expository* preaching, because it explains, or describes, what’s there in the Bible.

If the local church will not teach the rock-solid word of God, where will Christian people find it? When that absolute assurance of the Word of God is lost, Christians are easily washed away by “every wind and wave,” just what Paul would prevent in v.14.

In your relationships within your church community, it's fine to talk about sports or the kids or school. But talk about Sunday's sermon, too. Ask each other what God has been teaching you in His word. The Word of God is the food and water by which a disciple is nourished. The fourth truth about discipleship, it requires teaching the word of God.

5. Discipleship requires modeling the Word

Fifth, discipleship requires teaching in love. Paul bookends his thoughts in Ephesians 4:1-16 between an emphasis on love: "bear with one another in love," he writes in 4:2, then in 4:16, he concludes this thought by saying that "the body builds itself up in love." And here, in verse 15, he says, "speak the truth in love."

Apparently, it's not enough to teach the truth. There is a *manner*, a way, that goes along with this. If we combine truth and love, we can see that discipleship happens through a whole way of life. "In love" speaks to an experience one has within a community.

The Navigators is a ministry that was started in the 1930s by a lumberyard worker, Dawson Trotman, who had become inspired by 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul says to the young pastor he is training, Timothy,

what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2).

Trotman made this a way of life, and out of his work came this organization, The Navigators, devoted to discipleship. The Navigators have described discipleship as "life-on-life" mentoring. And I think that phrase helps us think about how *truth* and *love* operate together.

If you are to teach the truth in love, you have to be close enough to a person not only to help them understand things about God but also for them to experience your affection and care for them.

This means inviting them into your life. Discipling doesn't only happen on Sundays. It happens all week—when you invite someone to join you for dinner. Or a busy mom invites a younger woman to come over and help while she does a few chores. Or a dad invites a young single guy to come along to his son's soccer tournament. In these times together, we model how Christians live.

When we are together, we not only see the good, but the bad. If you are discipling someone—helping them grow like Christ—you will need to be okay with them seeing you model not only strength but also weakness. You may need to lead in confessing sins and help them understand how you fight sin. Sometimes what a young Christian needs to see most is that more mature Christians are not perfect—but they are keeping on, not giving up.

But to speak the truth in love suggests that we both help others *understand* truths about God, but also that we *model a whole way of life*, that's infused with the character of God.

6. Discipleship is God's plan for you

Finally, notice who does the work of ministry in vv 11-12, and what that work is:

Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (4:11-12).

The leaders are to equip the saints: that's all of us. And the saints are equipped for *the work of ministry*. Ministry could also be translated as *service*. And what is that ministry? Verse 12 into 13:

Building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (4.12-13)

Christians often wonder about their calling—what God has made them to do. There are ways our callings differ, but there is a deep way in which they are similar: each Christian is called by God to help other Christians follow Jesus and grow more like him. This is “the work of ministry” you are being equipped for in this church.

So, will you take the initiative? Will you pray about someone God may be calling you to help grow more like Him?

The first place you may want to look is your family. Your family is a set of relationships God has given you for life. Is there anyone in your family you could start spending more time with, with the aim of

talking about Christ? If not your nuclear family, perhaps someone in your church family. Look for someone who is teachable, eager, and excited to learn. Maybe someone who has a similar schedule, who lives or works near you—with whom it would be easy to build in time for a weekly walk or coffee.

Along with taking initiative, have a plan. Plan to help someone grow in understanding of Jesus, to grow “in the knowledge of the Son of God” (4:13). Perhaps outline a book of the Bible together or read it together. You could also meet to talk about last Sunday’s sermon. Ask them what God is teaching them. Ask them how you can pray for them and encourage them. And help them grow in Christian living—help them love their spouse better, or kids better, or help them learn how to pray; help them learn what it means to live sacrificially, and for others.

Discipleship is where the dynamic power of God flows through personal relationships. And Christians are to be disciples. We are to be growing more like Christ and helping others do so—and this happens through close relationships.

Here are some words from Charles Spurgeon to close with, who, in borrowing some from Mr. Great-heart in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, writes beautifully of a life given to helping others grow like and faithfully follow, Jesus Christ:

I am occupied, in my small way, as Mr. Great-heart was employed in Bunyan’s day... I am in the same line of business. I am engaged in personally-conducted tours to Heaven.... It is my business, as best I can, to kill dragons, and cut off giants’ heads, and lead on the timid and trembling. I am often afraid of losing some of the weaklings. I have the heart-ache for them; but, by God’s grace, and your kind and generous help in looking after one another, I hope we shall all travel safely to the river’s edge.

Oh, how many have I had to part with there! I have stood on the brink, and I have heard them singing in the midst of the stream, and I have almost seen the shining ones lead them up the hill, and through the gates, into the Celestial City.⁵

This is our noble calling, dear friends, to take a friend’s hand, and help one another as we journey toward that Great City.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Ephesians 4:11-16. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. How would you define a disciple of Jesus Christ?
 2. Have you ever been discipled? How did that come about?
 3. Have you ever discipled someone?
 4. How might you disciple a new believer who asked you to meet with them regularly to help them grow like Christ?
 5. Paul is calling not merely for individual growth, but for the whole church (“the whole body” v. 26) to grow more like Christ. What are some ways that your home church, TFCA, needs to grow more like Christ?
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Endnotes

1. Abigail Thompson, “Gen Z Needs a Place at Your Kitchen Table,” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 1, 2023.
2. Jonathan Morrow, “Only 4 Percent of Gen Z Have a Biblical Worldview,” *Impact 360 Institute*, September 1, 2023. <https://www.impact360institute.org/articles/4-percent-gen-z-biblical-worldview/>
3. Thompson, “Gen Z Needs a Place at Your Kitchen Table.”
4. David Wells, *Above all Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 119.
5. Charles H. Spurgeon, [*C. H. Spurgeon’s Autobiography, Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records, by His Wife and His Private Secretary, 1854–1860*](#) (vol. 2; Chicago; New York; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), 2: 131.