

Undisciplined Disciples Part I

a sermon in the series
The Apprentice: An Analysis of What it Means to be a Disciple

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Hebrews 5:12-14

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Because so many today have an unbiblical view of discipleship, or no view at all, it is important that we take the time to understand what the Bible means by the word *disciple*. Last week we defined a Christian disciple is someone “who sacrifices his life to following Jesus in order to be like Him.”

It was also demonstrated that discipleship is not optional, but that every true Christian is a disciple of Jesus. Every believer is a person who follows Christ to the degree they know Christ. Herein lies a problem. There are many sincere Christians who know Christ as Savior but they do not know Him as Mentor, Trainer, or Discipled. It’s never dawned on them that they could relate to Him like this, but that’s what salvation is. It’s to enter into His apprenticeship. They have believed Him for the forgiveness of sins and they try to live a “good Christian life” as the culture defines it, and I don’t mean secular culture but the Christian culture. But where does the Bible say any culture, Christian or otherwise, ought to define the Christian life? Where does the Bible say traditions ought to tell us what it means to be a Christian? The Bible doesn’t say that at all. We’ve turned this book into a book of rules rather than a manual of apprenticeship teaching Christians to follow and relate to Christ as a person.

Therefore, we have an epidemic on our hands. There is an epidemic in many good churches, including ours, of what I call *undisciplined disciples*. I know it’s a paradoxical phrase, but it has a great deal of meaning. You are saved but you have not been disciplined because the church has failed to fulfill the Great Commission. Author Dallas Willard called it the “Great Omission,” because

that's how most churches deal with Matthew 28:19-20—they don't. Or they wrongly define it to make it appear as if they are fulfilling it.

This is a different problem than I discussed last week. In last week's message the problem was that there are so many in American churches that believe being a Christian and being a disciple is different. That somehow discipleship is optional. All you need to get into heaven is to at least believe upon Jesus while discipleship is for the pastor or spiritually elite. That is not true. Discipleship is not optional.

This view is a result of another wrong view, which says saving grace is a sin-forgiving-grace-only, which means to be a Christian is no more than being a person forgiven of their sins and guaranteed heaven.

Jesus describes the Christian life as a life lived following Him in order to be like Him. That is the only kind of saving grace the Bible talks about. God gives you the grace to be forgiven and then enter into His apprenticeship to be transformed. The transformation process is not instantaneous. It's a lifelong process that Jesus is working in every one of His people. So if you claim to be a Christian today, does your definition of the Christian life say you are His apprentice and are yielded to Him so He can do whatever He wants with you? Does your definition say you're going to follow Him because you want to learn how to be like Him? If it does and you living it, then you are a disciple. It's only by God's grace we can live like this.

But this is not the problem I want to address today. I want to deal with true disciples who have, for whatever reason, not been discipled. There is a church culture that hinders discipleship. The culture of churches today doesn't help discipleship it actually shuts it down. There are reasons why so many today are disciples of Jesus but are undiscipled, meaning no one invested their life into them showing them how to be like Jesus. It is this problem I want to tackle with you today.

Evidently, according to our text, this is not just a modern day problem because the latter part of the first century suffered it. The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges something is wrong with the church. He does not accuse them of not being Christians but he says they are stunted in their spiritual progress. Virtually, they had made little to no progress.

He takes them to task, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”

In this message, I propose we find out how it is that you get a church full of spiritual babies. Next Sunday, if the Lord wills, we will discover how to grow spiritual babies up into spiritual maturity. And by the way we aren’t talking about how long you’ve been saved chronologically, whether it be three weeks, three years, or 30 years. We’re talking about why, no matter how long you’ve been saved, you are not mature. We’ve got to first discover the why before we can find the solution. That’s what we’re going to do today. How is it possible to have good people who have been saved for years and yet have grown very little in their faith?

I. THE DIAGNOSIS OF THE PROBLEM OF THE HEBREWS

Three Observations About the Problem:

There are three things the writer of Hebrews brings out in this text that give us the reason why there are spiritual babies in the Hebrew church, and I believe they are very applicable to us today.

1. It is Not a Church Full of New Converts.

If this was a new church plant or if most of the people were new converts, we could understand why they might have a church full of spiritual babies but that’s not the case here. It’s an established church that’s been there for years because the writer acknowledges that much time has elapsed and by now everyone ought to be a teacher of the Gospel. But clearly they weren’t. The writer acknowledges this fact when he says,

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”
(Hebrews 5:12 emphasis mine)

2. They Needed to Reaffirm Their Understanding of Christ Being the End of the Law.

They needed to go back to elementary school and relearn how Christ brought an end to the Law.

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They needed to go back to the beginnings of the Gospel because they did not understand how the redemptive plan of God worked.

This church was comprised of basically Jews, hence the name, *Hebrews*. They had suffered persecution and many of their members had defected and returned to Judaism. The pressure of persecution combined with the pressure from unsaved family members and friends trying to persuade Christians to leave their faith and return to Judaism and the Law of Moses, led to many defections. Many within the church had succumbed to the arguments. They couldn't withstand the pressure of the arguments that Judaism was actually better than Christianity.

Scholars think some of the arguments waged against this church were, “If you say Christianity is better, why is it that you can't see your Leader? Why is there no temple, no altar, or sacrifices? Why is there nothing tangible in your worship of God?” The accusers would point back to the Old Testament and say, “This is how you worship God. Where's your priest when you need one? Haven't you learned you aren't sufficient to learn the commandments of God?” Every Christian would have to say, “You're right, I'm not sufficient.” The Jews had priests to help them worship God. Therefore, many of the Christians renounced their faith in Jesus and went back to their old life. This is why the author of the epistle says they needed to be taught again the superiority of Christ over Moses and His Law. They needed to see that Jesus was better.

Many of you are looking at me right now and saying, “Thank you for the history lesson, Pastor, but this has nothing to do with me. I'm not living back then, I'm not a Jew, I didn't come from Judaism and I don't even know what Moses said.” But it does matter to you because we make the same mistake. Something comes along in life and distracts us; it might be another teaching or religion but usually it's not. Do you know what it usually is? A crisis, a person, or a material thing comes into our lives and the next thing we know our head is jerked away from Christ and we are pursuing another thing or person and we've forgotten the superiority of Jesus, not just over

the Law of Moses, but over everything. Just like these folks, some of you are spiritually immature; you are easily distracted.

3. They Were Not Ignorant of the Information But Lacked the Skill of Application.

The writer did not accuse them of not knowing the facts of the Gospel because they did know the facts. The Gospel is simple, isn't it? I'm a sinner; I can't save myself no matter how good I am. God loved me enough to send a Savior—His very own Son—who became a man like me. He lived His life and endured challenges like I face and then some more that I'll never face. He gave His life to die for me, in my place, taking my sins. He suffered the wrath of God for those sins but three days later—thank God, hallelujah—He arose from the dead. He was resurrected and now He is at the right hand of God representing me as my advocate so that now I am perfectly righteous because I trusted Him. The Gospel says if you put your faith in this Jesus then His obedience, His perfection, and His goodness is all given to you as a gift because He received all of your sin and suffered for it. That's the Gospel.

The Hebrews knew that. It wasn't a lack of information; it was they were unskilled in knowing the implications of how the facts affected every issue of life. Let me say it this way. Their problem is much like ours. We have the facts of Christianity and we know them, but we are not capable of translating those facts into action or knowing how to apply them to every challenge that comes into our life. The Gospel can be applied to every challenge you face physically, spiritually emotionally, and financially. It takes a spiritually mature person to take the facts of the Gospel and convert them into wisdom and knowledge and know how to use the facts of the Gospel in life.

*“For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.”
(Hebrews 5:13)*

The Christian has the Book, he knows what the Book says but he's unskilled in how to make it practical in his life.

Those are the three observations, which then tell us the diagnosis of the problem is: these believers had the Gospel, they had exercised some kind of trust in it, and had been saved even to the point of enduring persecution for the Gospel, but they were still spiritually immature.

II. FOUR REASONS FOR UNDISCIPLED DISCIPLES

How does a church get here? How does a church stay spiritually immature? We are going to stay with this text and glean from it four reasons they stayed this way.

I want you to listen with ears applying this to our church body as a whole and then listen with ears that apply it to you personally.

1. Losing Sight of the Goal of Discipleship.

This church had forgotten the purpose for which they existed; it was to be discipled and to disciple others. The goal of discipleship is every Christian is trained to make disciples.

If you claim the name of Christ, then you are not exempt from being a disciple maker. That's the goal whether you like it or not. That's what our head, Jesus, has established for us so that's what we have to do.

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers . . .”

If it were just preachers who were the disciplers, then the writer would not have said this. He is addressing the entire church body. He's looking at every born-again believer, and he's saying, “You ought to be teachers because that's what Jesus commanded you to be. Every one of you.” Isn't that what Jesus said?

“Go therefore and make disciples . . . teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”(Matthew 28:19a, 20a)

We are not just to teach what Jesus said to do; we are to teach *how* to do it.

A church loses sight of discipleship when discipleship is no longer defined as the process to become like Jesus. When something becomes more important than making disciples, when a church has a purpose other than making disciples, then that church is doomed to be spiritually immature.

Today we have campaigns all the time and churches are being bombarded with experts who will tell them, “This is what your purpose ought to be.” For some, it’s numbers. Their whole goal is to be big. When you substitute any goal, no matter how good it is, for what Jesus said—making disciples—you are condemning that church to be full of spiritual babies.

Friends, there are a lot of worthy causes that a church should be involved in. There is nobody in this room who hates abortion more than I do. I know its pain. I know its evilness. But listen, fighting abortion is not the goal and crusade God gave the church. I am against and not for, same-sex marriage, but that’s not the goal and crusade of the church. I despise the gambling industry. I don’t want the legalization of drugs and alcohol but my goal in life is not to campaign against those things. And anytime a church makes anything other than disciple-making the goal, that church is condemned to spiritual immaturity.

We think that being a Christian means going to church, being kind to strangers, turning the other cheek, helping when called upon, doing all the good things and avoiding all the bad things, while living like everyone else the remainder of the time when we are not doing “church stuff.” We think being a Christian means that I don’t do the kinds of sins the evil are guilty of and live a good life of kindness and generosity. We suppose that if we do the best we can to love our enemies we are obeying Jesus. Having done these things, then the rest of our lives I live we can live like everyone else.

When I say *everyone else* I don’t mean all the things we know we’re not supposed to do. I mean you don’t let Jesus impact every facet of your life. You still have the same goals that a lost man has. You’re just like your friend or coworker who lives everyday to be a little bit more secure financially or like some family member who wants to be well and not sick and that’s the motivation and passion of their heart. What’s the difference between that and a sinner who does that?

If being a disciple is being here at ten o’clock on Sunday morning and when you leave here you’re kind to strangers and you turn the other cheek, but the rest of the time the whole motivation of your life is nothing more than getting ahead financially, making sure you’re comfortable and healthy, then you’re living your life no differently than someone who has never professed the name of Jesus. That’s not discipleship. Jesus didn’t save you to sanctify your material pursuits. He didn’t save you so could be obsessed with your physical body and its wellbeing. Discipleship is not these things.

If we make anything other than discipleship the goal of our church, then we're going to be spiritually immature.

2. The Spiritually Mature Instruct But Do Not Train.

Part of the reason for having a church of spiritual babies is the spiritually mature teach and not train.

The end result of discipleship is to follow, observe, learn, and imitate Jesus in order to be like Jesus. That's what we're after. It is not to make scholars and theologians. As painful as it is to say that, it's not the goal. My goal is not to make you first-rate theologians, my goal and job, is to make disciples of Jesus. But modern churches today have substituted being like Jesus with knowing about Jesus. That's why we have a church full of immature people. I'm not saying teaching is bad, the Bible over and over again says teaching is necessary. "...teach them to observe all I have commanded..." "Preach the Word! Be instant in season and out of season..."

I cannot make my lips form the words to say teaching or preaching is not necessary. It's not in my DNA because it's not in the DNA of the Bible. Teaching is commanded in the Bible and is necessary to discipleship, but then so is milk necessary for an infant; but you don't want an adult's diet to be nothing but milk. Milk is okay, but not as a steady diet for an adult. Milk along with a warm, out of the oven chocolate chip cookie may be good, but to live off of milk only would not be healthy.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. (Hebrews 5:12-13)

Why would it be unhealthy for an older child or adult to have a steady diet of milk? What's wrong with that? Why can an infant only have milk? Let's answer that by asking this question: Where does milk come from? Let's talk about a mother's milk for her baby. A little child does not have the skill sets and tools to take in solid food, chew it, and digest it. There are certain hormones and compounds that are not yet developed, there are no teeth, it would be fatal to an infant to give it solid food. It doesn't have the skill set to digest solid food. So the mother takes in food, chews

and digests it. At the molecular level the body takes nutrients from solid masses and liquefies it so that the little babe at her breast can be nurtured and nourished.

I confess to you again, one of my failures in the twenty years I've been here is that I have majored on teaching and have not trained sufficiently. I confess that as a wrong to you and to God and plead your forgiveness. I know He's forgiven me but I ask now for yours. When you just give milk and do not develop the skill sets to help a soul digest for itself, you'll have a continual state of immaturity.

I read an article a couple of weeks ago that said Americans do not chew their food enough. Most people swallow their food almost whole. The article said you ought to chew a bite of food at least one hundred times. Wow. At the end of the article it said a hundred is probably too much but you should chew until you have ground up the food until it's somewhat liquefied. It is this process of chewing well your food that starts the digestion process. We think swallowing and getting the food into the stomach starts the digestion process. But that is not true. Even the compounds of your saliva are made by God to start the digestion process. That's why we chew, so that when the food gets to the stomach the body can better get the nutrients and minerals out of it.

Do you know why most of you can eat and then in a couple of hours be hungry again? You're not chewing your food enough. In that case the stomach can't get nutrients because the food hasn't been broken up enough. So the brain says to the stomach, "I'm mineral deficient, give me some more food." The problem is not the amount of food; the problem is how we chew or should I say, don't chew our food.

A baby can't chew its food a hundred times a bite. It doesn't have the skill set. It can't chew at all. This is the point of the author.

*For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.
(Hebrews 5:13)*

Unskilled is two words in the Greek that come together to mean *without experience*. It's not a lack of information. It wasn't for the Hebrews. They knew the Gospel. It's not for you. You know the Gospel. Anybody who has been at this church for any length of time is theologically astute, which means you could probably pass a theology test I gave you.

You know the Bible, you know its information, but you're not skilled enough to digest it for yourself because the most of what you get from the Bible is from me, and not your own relationship with the Lord. I'm the one chewing on the Word, I'm the one who is biting it off, mulling it around—meaning praying over it and thinking hard over it and hearing from God—and then I break it down for you in about a 45 minute digestible format so you can hear it. Every time I'm in this pulpit, all I'm doing is giving you milk. I'm taking what I chewed and digested and giving to you second hand.

Some of you think it's pretty potent milk, but it's not solid. If I were to give you everything I got while preparing it would take me hours to tell you. Even as I prepared this message I had to divide it into two messages. As I went through it and mulled it over some more I thought, "How am I going to do all of this in 45 minutes?" What you're getting from me is milk because another person ate it, digested it, assimilated it, and then produced it for you just like a mother produces milk for her baby, a cow for its calves.

Unskilled means you have not learned how to take the truth you've learned and apply it to difficult, hard, unpleasant everyday life. So what God is teaching me is how to do that. How can I start training as I teach? Pray for me as God is challenging me with how we can do that for all of you.

3. Pastoral Care Takes Place of Discipleship.

Today the predominant philosophy of how a church works is this way—the pastors are hired to do the work of discipleship. "That's what you're for, Pastor. It sounds like today you're getting a little lazy on us and you want us to do your job for you. That's what we pay you to do." You think that's funny and I meant it to be a little humorous but do you know there are men whom I know that have been told that, with no smile on the face of the deacon or board member or member of the church who said it? "We don't want to be told we have to do work and minister and disciple and invest our lives in people. That's what we pay you to do." That philosophy so dominates thinking today and I fear there is some of that still in us.

God gave me to you. I agree that you have the short end of the deal. I tell Karen that all the time. I am the pastor and teacher God gave to the pulpit of this church and He did so to equip, teach, and train. I am to show you how to observe the commandments, not just show you what the commandments are.

But one man can't do that by himself. I can't disciple every one of you. Even Jesus didn't do that when He was a man on this earth. He disciplined twelve and of the twelve He took three and did more in depth training with them than He did with the other nine. Jesus, the God-Man, and yet, all He had was twelve of whom He really concentrated on three. How then am I, not God, going to be able to disciple each and every one of you? I can't. But it is my responsibility to make sure that happens for all of you. That's where I'm seeking God right now. It's my job to teach you how to make disciples. If you don't know how to do that, there's only one place you can point your fingers and that's at me. I assume full responsibility.

The reason I am to train you is so,

“that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,” (Ephesians 4:14)

You're not to stay little babies. If you stay a little baby you will be distracted by anything. That's what Paul means by “tossed to and fro.”

Being a grandparent has been a relearning experience for me. I'm relearning things I used to know but have forgotten since the boys grew up. His two grandmothers, Karen and Diane, babysit Logan because his parents work. That means Karen has him at least a couple days a week. When I come home for lunch Logan will start grinning and laughing. I will, of course, pick him up thinking at that very second, “I am really cool!” To this kid I'm really cool. You folks know I'm not cool but don't tell him. To him, I'm really cool. When I walk in the room I almost always get a smile and I can set him in my lap and start to play with him and he'll laugh and we'll have a wonderful time. But it isn't 30 seconds later his head is turned and he's looking at something else and Grandpa is no longer interesting. He'll hear a noise and turn his head and look that way—very alert child, very smart—but with that he's easily distracted. He is tossed to and fro. That's why the Apostle Paul uses that metaphor because you can be 40 or 50 but still be like a baby if you're tossed to and fro. Something can come along and before too long your eyes are off of Jesus and you're on to something else. What's the remedy for that?

“but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Paul is saying that the work of discipleship is not just the work of pastors; it's the work of us all. Every one of you. The only way a church will grow up into a spiritually mature body is if everybody is doing his or her part. That means discipleship ought to be occurring all the time. When you make discipleship something formal, classroom-like, and academic, you've destroyed it because discipleship is to be a natural part of life. My job is to help you renew your thinking so that you think about this all the time until you don't have to think about it. For example, when I'm having a conversation with somebody—it doesn't matter who it is, if they're saved or unsaved or a part of this church or not—within a few moments I'm starting to disciple. I don't have to think about it. It's not something I have to make myself do. It just happens because it's become a way of life. In fact, sometimes I have to stop myself from going to far too fast.

Discipleship has to be a natural thing. Let me give you an example. A sister calls you and says, "I need to talk to you. I'm at my wits end. I've lost all patience with these children. I don't know why I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. I just thought you would pray for me." So you pray for her and then you say something like this, "I know what you're talking about. I've been there. Let me share with you how Jesus and the truth of the Gospel applies to this very area and helped me." That is discipleship.

This happened to me the other day, a man called me up and said, "Pastor, I read this in my Bible today and I thought of you. I don't know why but I felt like I should call you." And they read the verse to me and that was the conversation. That is discipleship. That brother, who is relatively new in the faith, was teaching and discipling me.

That's what Paul is saying here. Discipleship should be going on horizontally all the time. It should be something that is always working in our body, then our body will grow up.

4. *The Concept of Church Changes From A Self-Sharpening Community to A Self-Seeking Consumerism.*

Another way to say it is we have changed the church from being a discipling community to an individual spiritual spa where the member is pampered and treated like a consumer.

This usually starts where? The children. "We've got to have something for the children because they don't get anything out of the adults' worship." But I disagree. You would be astounded with

what children get out a sermon. Just ask them today what they learned out of this message. If they don't give you an answer at all, then they weren't listening and that's your fault, parent.

But a church begins to change from a community discipling each other to a consumer-oriented focus with children's programs. Then it moves to the dads and moms, "It's not just my children, I need something to teach me about being a good parent." The next thing is individual groups form to meet other needs until finally felt needs become the next step. Someone will suggest that it would be really great if guys who like to fish form a Christian fishing club. Oh how did the church survive the centuries without a Christian golf club or Pilates class?

Eventually, the church is fragmented with all these agendas and programs. What does that tell you? That the church has become like a mall, full of all these different individual kind of stores and you can go and get what you want and leave the rest alone. Friends, that is not a New Testament church.

The writer of Hebrews says one of the reasons he had a church full of spiritual babies is because they had not been sharpening each other. He tells them that they hadn't encouraged and exhorted one another. So he says,

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

We take verse 25 and preach great sermons on why people don't need to neglect coming to church on Sunday. But I don't think that's what it's talking about. I think his meaning is exactly what he said. I think you are to *everyday* exhort one another. Here is God's design for us at Oak Grove: He longs for this to be a true Body, a family, a community, of individuals who have covenanted—made a promise to each other—to be in their lives to help them be more like Jesus. That means considering one another, coming together, and exhorting one another. When that happens here on a daily basis, then this church will be spiritually strong and God will be able to do much.

When God starts blessing this church with new additions, we must not lose the goal. What's the goal? To make people Christ-like, not imitators of us. We cannot let numbers become the goal

of this body. This is where many churches have missed the mark. For them it's all about building more attendance. Let me tell you what happens when that becomes your goal and not discipleship. You can definitely get a lot more people inside the building. You can build numbers. From 1993 to January 2000, that's what I was doing. I tried to be more theological about it, but that's exactly what I was doing and we were up to a hundred and thirty every Sunday. We grew rapidly from about 50 to 130. And then God wrecked it all. He came right in and said, "You are building this church on you and not Me." And for the next two hours I was on my face in my office crying and brokenhearted as God began to dismantle so much of what I had built.

We cannot make the mistake of going back to numbers because if anything other than discipleship is the goal, what happens? Spiritual immaturity will take over.

If we want to grow numerically we need to focus on growing spiritually. We need to focus on becoming more like Jesus. And as the church begins to rise in maturity do you know what will happen? We will reach people. The life of Jesus always attracts, maybe not the majority, but it will attract those whom He has chosen. It's the beauty of Christ that is our attraction. This is not about Oak Grove or Michael Durham, this is about the beauty of Jesus Christ being so attractive to people that they want Him, then God is the One who is glorified.

If God would have allowed us to build the building we had intended to build, do you know what would have happened? I would have become a god to many of you because that's what always happens when a church begins to grow. The pastor becomes a celebrity and the celebrity becomes the idol and object of worship. God loves me and He loves you too much to let that happen.

When a church, not just the pastor, is sharpening and making disciples of one another then God begins to build that church up and people begin to be discipled outside the church. Who gets the credit for it? Not the pastor, not the church, but Jesus Christ. That's what I want. That's what you want. We want Jesus to be seen because He's so much better than any of us. Amen.