

Matthew

WOMENS CHALLENGE SMALL GROUP
APRIL 1994
STAGES OF DISCIPLESHIP GROWTH
Matthew 28:17-20

We talked last month about reaching the period of discouragement with a disciple. When the disciple "bottoms out." It is an interesting stage in discipleship because when our disciple leaves, or withdraws, or becomes disinterested, that is exactly when God works in our personal sanctification. This is when we become aware of (1) why we even chose the person, i.e., close, convenient, (2) immature emotions, i.e., anger, shock of ingratitude for "all our work," rejection, guilt, whatever. "I should have done more." "I should have done less." And we get depressed, want to quit. Many of us were at this point last month.

God has designed us in such a way that we have to be either growing or shrinking. We see that in our bodies. If we do not exercise, our muscles degenerate, become weaker. In times of discouragement, we are the ones that make the choice either to grow spiritually or withdraw from God. If we do not decide to draw nearer to God, the flesh will overtake. Our propensity to revert back to living in the flesh will always be there.

Remember, we talked last month about discouragement coming when we are taking our life from the wrong thing. "If my disciple leaves, then I am a failure." "If my disciple does well, then people will think better of me." This is reputation. Reputation is what others think about us. Character and faithfulness is what God is interested in. So, by the grace of God, he will be sure we "lose our reputation." (Read Psalm 4, Living Bible). It is not wrong to want to do a good job at discipling - certainly that is our goal, but truth is recognizing that the good work comes from the empowering of the Holy Spirit as we work in subjection to Him. If a disciple "bottoms out" it is because she has chosen not to go on with the Lord. Spiritually, this is what hurts because you know that she is only going to suffer more...but some just don't or won't listen. That is not our responsibility. Our prime responsibility is to

- (1) Lead them to taking their life from Christ, not us.
- (2) Warn them of Satan's "sifting," Luke 22:31,32.
- (3) Teach them of the power of the flesh and the world.

PSALM 4
Evening Prayer of Trust in God

*O God you have declared me perfect in your eyes;
You have always cared for me in my distress;
Be gracious to me as I pray again.*

*The Lord God asks, "Sons of men, will you forever turn
my glory into shame by worshipping these silly idols,
when every claim that's made for them is false?"
How long will you love what is worthless and aim
at deception? But know this for sure, the Lord has set
apart the redeemed for Himself; therefore, He will
listen to me and answer when I call to Him.*

*Stand before the Lord in awe, and do not sin against
Him. Lie quietly upon your bed in silent meditation.
Put your trust in the Lord and offer Him pleasing
sacrifices.*

*Many say that God will never help us. Prove them
wrong, O Lord, by letting the light of your face shine
down upon us. Yes, the gladness you have given me is
far greater than their joys at harvest time as they
gaze at their bountiful crops. I will lie down in
peace and sleep, for though I am alone, O Lord, You
will keep me safe.*

As disciplers, we are to live a triple life. This is different from leading a *double life* - where you says one thing and do another. But the triple life is a good thing. The triple life consists of:

1. The *Unseen Life*, ("Lo, I am with you always.")
2. The *Open Life of Obedience*, ("Go.")
3. The *Life of Service*. ("Make disciples, teaching them all that I have commanded you.")

The first of these three lives is THE UNSEEN LIFE. This is the life lived with Jesus, hidden from the eyes of others. This is the inner life of our private and personal contact with Him that others know nothing about. This is what is going to give us the ability to do the FIRST THING: influence others toward Christ. Because the seen depends upon the unseen. The outer life depends on the inner life. The life that others see depends on the life that only Jesus sees within us. David had the power to kill the lion and the bear in secret, away from the eyes of others, before he had the power to slay the giant before the eyes of two nations. Here lies the secret of being the true disciple and the effective discipler of others. We must be committed to Christ and spend time with Him, away from others. Time in prayer and study in the Word. This time must be planned because if it isn't, it will slip away. I am giving each of you a new 30-Day Experiment. Devotional excerpts have been selected for each day for thirty days to turn our minds on the things of God. I find this very helpful to read the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night.

John 15:5, "Without Me, you can do nothing."

1 Cor. 4:12, "Servants of Christ; stewards of the mysteries of God."
Companionship with Jesus. *Where He Is*, Cleland McAfee 1899.

The second life is an OPEN LIFE OF OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST. This is impossible without the power of Christ. And Jesus says, "I have the power to give you for that." (Matt 28:18). He is asking us to live out his life before others over and over again. "As the Father sent me, even so I send you." Paul talks about this in Gal. 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. The life I now live I live by faith in the power of Christ who gave His life for me." The controlling principle of Christ's life was to please his Father. His pervading passion was to win people. The characteristics of His life were obedience, unselfishness, sympathy, and simplicity. We are to be this way.

The third life is a LIFE OF ACTIVE SERVICE. We are commanded to GO. (Matt. 28:19) Some go to far lands, some to next door neighbors, some to friends in classrooms, some to co-workers.

This triple life is what is going to give us the power and ability to work with people, as well as enjoy the companionship with Jesus more and more, in all stages of spiritual growth in the life of a disciple. What are these stages?

WHERE HE IS

who had plucked him by the sleeve and dragged him out of sin. He could not tell his pastor what occurred, but something within him seemed to wail like a hurt and shamed companion, and it seemed to him so shameful that he had brought Him there—Him who had loved purity and godliness more than life, Him who had made heaven attractive by promising that His servant should be with Him—so shameful that he could not bear it a moment longer.

Sometimes this loving Companion waits long before He is recognized. Just the other day a man approaching his seventieth year, who had been straying away from his Lord for full forty years, remarked to me how he had never been given up. His Master had been asserting Himself all the time. He had wandered in many places; had been where his

WHERE HE IS

Master must have been pained to go, had fallen to depths where his Master must have been deeply shamed, but he had never been forsaken. The voice of pleading had not been silenced. He had drifted far, but never "beyond His love and care."

There is much comfort in this thought of the persistent purpose of Jesus to be where we are. An old philosopher taught that God created man because among all His other creatures none could come into personal relationship with Him and He was lonely for companionship. That is fanciful. Does it not, however, suggest what we know is true, that Jesus finds such joy in our companionship here that He would be on the earth lonely without it, as we would be lonely in heaven if He were not there?

But may we not flatter ourselves

WHERE HE IS

unduly with the thought that Jesus wants so much to be with us? Perhaps we might, but there are two reasons for His being with us, which will humble us again.

First, He is with us to help us. It is just because we are so weak and impotent of ourselves and have no self-sufficiency that He presses on with us. Shall a cripple feel flattered and proud on his own account, because a strong man walks by him, keeping him where he could not go alone? It is our helplessness that commends us to God. You remember that great verse of promise wherein Jesus says, "Lo, I am with you alway." Well, just before it, He said, "All power is given unto Me." As though He would say: "I know the work I give you is too much for you; I know the life I offer is too hard for you; I know the service I demand is too great for you;

WHERE HE IS

but look to Me; I have all authority, I can bid your foes depart or submit. Since all power is Mine and you need Me so much, I am with you alway." You see it is a promise based on our weakness. We would be strange folk if we read it backwards and saw in it a tribute to our worth!

Why does Jesus promise to be with you to-day, my brother? Is it not because He would give you strength and grace where your office-work or your labor becomes wearing and exhausting? There are problems for you to solve to-day—"He is made unto us wisdom." There are old sins that you would gladly forget, but they will stare at you to-day out of accusing eyes—"He is made unto us righteousness." There are faults that will catch you unawares and stain the whiteness of your life—"He is made unto us sanctifica-

WHERE HE IS

tion." There are habits that bind you down to an unworthy life—"He is made unto us redemption."

And you, Christian mother, why does your Master promise to be with you to-day? Is it not to remind you that you are dependent on Him? Days are dreary enough when you leave Him out, and He has a way of helping through the most annoying hours. That is a remarkable phrase: "The patience of Christ." You mothers need Him with you that you may have His patience when little ones are cross and teasing. You need the fairness of Jesus with household help that will blunder and fail. You need the kindness of Jesus to carry you through annoying social duties. It is because you need and have not this strength that Jesus presses along day by day with you. Let it make us all humble and glad.

The other reason why Jesus wants

26

WHERE HE IS

to be with us is that He must somehow make us fit to be with Him after a while. Have you ever thought of the kindness of His word to the dying thief: "To-day shalt thou be *with me* in Paradise"? Of course, He might have sent the newly redeemed man on ahead into the joyful companionships, might have told him he should be with Abraham and David and Isaiah. But what a sea of strange faces would be there! How unfamiliar it would seem! And how much sweeter the promise that he should be introduced into the unaccustomed presence by the One whom he already knew and loved! Jesus does not allow us to come to that eternal companionship with Him until He teaches us what it means. There is no way by which we can learn it but by His companionship with us. Some one asked a philologist how we learn to talk. He

27

WHERE HE IS

replied, "By talking." We learn to be with Jesus by being with Him. This earthly walk with Him is His training course wherein He gets us ready for our eternal life—the life where we shall be where He is.

28

III

THE PERSONAL VALUE OF BEING.

WHERE HE IS

"We shall be like Him."

THINK what effect that being with Christ must have on our characters. Holiness develops by contact. The very presence of a good man makes men better. There are birds so sensitive to their enemies that they feel their presence before they can see them. Sometimes waifs are made heroes by being brought out of low surroundings and into contact with large hearts and broad lives. You remember how Garfield felt about Mark Hopkins, that merely being with him was an education. Of the founder of a western college

29

1 John 2:13-14 speaks about these different stages of growth.

1. Little children
2. Young adults
3. Adults

Can you recognize which stage of growth your disciple is in? That you are in?

1. *DEPENDENT CHILDHOOD* (CURIOUS)
2. *ADOLESCENCE* (CURIOUS AND CONVINCED)
3. *PROGRESSIVE MATURITY* (CONVINCED AND COMMITTED)

One rule of emotions is that the less mature will try to bring down the more mature to their level, because change is always fought. If we, as the discipler, are *progressively maturing*, and our disciple is going through adolescence, don't be surprised at our immature reactions. God will be bringing up deeper emotional issues up out of our heart, which usually are caused by ignorance, immaturity, sin, and character weakness, which expose our lack of love, trust in God and/or forgiveness. Infatiles are used *mightily* for our sanctification! Especially if we have difficulty in confronting or disciplining. They will expose every area where we come up short! They will teach us where we have trouble communicating our belief and make us think things through more thoroughly.

It is extremely important that we develop a prayer life, much like Jesus had. Luke 5:16 says, "But Jesus himself *habitually* withdrew into solitary places to pray." It seems He prayed mostly in the early morning. Isa 50:4. God wakened him that he might spend the first hours of his day with his father. Not only did Christ pray every day, but in the turning points of his career he rested his soul with God. He prayed during the temptations in the desert; his baptism; the choosing of the twelve; the transfiguration; the raising of Lazarus; in the Garden; and on the Cross. The more the crowd pressed against him, the more he prayed.

The warning for us here is if we do not pray in times of doubt, confusion, insecurity, we will lose the confidence that God can give us. We will lose the settledness in heart that His comfort and direction can give. Jeremiah 10:23 says, "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself; Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps. Prov. 20:24 says, "Man's steps are *ordained* by the Lord, how then can man understand his way?" We need God's direction.

William Cowper wrote:

*"When not praying we cease to fight,
Prayer makes the Christian's armor bright;
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees."*

STAGE 1 - DEPENDENT CHILDHOOD

In spiritual maturity, as in human life, there are three stages of growth. The first is *dependent childhood*. Humanly speaking, this is when the infant has to rely on others for almost everything. The infant makes no decisions and needs constant care and nurture. Spiritually, this is when *primary spiritual development* takes place. The disciple is going to place much responsibility on you - to love them, to treat them special, to express their worth and value, to help them measure growth. They are going to want a lot of time and closeness to you. They are very dependent at this time. They are coming out of the world where they have experienced sin, shame, addictions, alienation, loneliness, anxiety, fear - all those effects of sin that are experienced in a life spent apart from God.

It seems with women, that you will find either those that are super work for loves (I'll do anything you say), or the resistant (prove it to me) types. This is where it is very helpful to know the temperaments and strengths and weaknesses. Also, family background plays a big part in their emotional maturity level. We can help them discover the reasons to their emotional reactions to circumstances.

STAGE 2 - ADOLESCENCE

As your disciple heads toward adolescence, you will find she gets impatient at restraints. Humanly, these are the teenage years. A very difficult period - both for the kid and the parent. Everything is questioned. It's the same spiritually. You will see your disciple: balking, touchy, emotional, easily hurt, quarrelsome, gossipy, expressing strong likes and dislikes. She will ask questions like, "Why did you do that?" She wants to step out on her own. She wants to develop her own abilities. She begins to want to do something other than what you suggest. Her gifting is starting to blossom and she wants to take on ownership of how it is used, and doesn't want to give anyone else credit. A very ego-centric period of time.

If your disciple *doesn't* go through this stage...watch out! You may have a pretender, one who keeps her heart secret because of fear of rejection. These are the ones that many times cause trouble after they are sent off. They hold bitterness and are autonomous. The adolescent time is extremely important to get at the deeper issues in the heart.

When a disciple enters into this spiritual growth stage, she will react much like she did with her biological family. Maybe she will begin to withdraw or be vague. She doesn't call you as much, or ask as many questions. Your insecurities will come to surface, and you'll have thoughts like, "What have I done (not done)?" "Do I even know what I am doing?" But if we recognize this as normal growth, as well as possible spiritual oppression and lack of trust in God, we will be better able to handle this changing relationship. The disciple wants (and needs) to make her own decisions. She needs to set new goals. She needs to experience success or failure that *originates from her faith in the Lord* - not yours. She needs to learn how to handle spiritual warfare. The disciple will experience a lot of personal inadequacies and insecurities at this time. She will be more aware of her weaknesses. She is no longer content to be dependent on you and feels competent to choose her own destiny. And, in fact, resents input from those she used to depend on. However, she still needs your input and direction. Hang in there! It is like hanging onto a kite caught in a whirlwind!

If we are caught off guard, we will find ourselves getting hurt and angry and resentful. "After all I've done for you...how could you..." The typical work-for-love reaction. This is also where Satan tries to divide. The adolescent creates problems. The mature solves them. Teaching and discipline and direction is essential. This is where notes from past insights you have kept on the disciple will really help. As you go back through your notes on this person, you will recall some of the previous warnings and direction given. When the disciple is going through this time, they will think in distorted ways, they will forget, they will accuse, they will believe lies, and Satan works hard to send his agents at this vulnerable time to divide and discourage.

A disciples in this stage has to learn to choose friends wisely - how to be *in the world, but not of it*. She will be working to develop good habits in prayer, bible study and ministry. She has to learn a life pace that is good for her. In a very new way, she can learn to become a life-giving leader. She becomes not only a witness to Christ, but can now begin to give His Life out. She will begin the struggle of "losing her life for the sake of Christ." Matt. 10:39. This is where lots of discussion about values and lifeviews comes up, i.e.:

1. God's Worldview: Not flirting with the world, but satisfied with Christ. How much is she still impacted by the "lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life?" Does she have God's perspective on the world? Does she handle lightly the things of this world? Is she generous with her money, talents, time?
2. Emotional Maturity. The mature Christian has settled personal convictions and is willing to suffer for them. Decisions are thought through before the Lord in prayer. Watch her reactions with others. Does she forgive, or does she hold grudges? Is she a gossip? How does she handle conflict?
3. Other-centeredness. This will show up especially in marriage and friendships, especially if they live in a ministry house. Can she give credit to others? Does she let others have first place? Does she sacrificially serve others? Does she let go of little issues?
4. Sensitive to evil. Having the ability to discriminate between good and evil. Clear minded about the harm of some things. Usually acts according to principle rather than desire. Confrontive with self and others about harmful ways. Does she admit her temptations? Does she come to you when she gets involved in a sin? Does she compromise?
5. Gracious nature. Being ready to forgive others for real or supposed faults and weaknesses, yet aware of our own. Being a problem solver rather than a problem spotter. Can she give others the benefit of the doubt? Is she a team player? Can she let little things pass by without reacting?

(Taken in part from *In Pursuit of Maturity*, J. Oswald Sanders, pp. 31-36.

Jer. 8:4-6 - When the disciple recognizes her own sin is when she begins to mature spiritually. A BIG STEP.

AN ILLEGITIMATE INFANCY

Once the Israelites had crossed the miraculously divided Red Sea, the journey into Canaan was only an eleven-day trek (Deut. 1:2). For wise reasons, however, God directed them to take a route that lengthened their travels by several months. This gave them time to adjust to their new and unaccustomed role as free people.

To reach Canaan, the Israelites had to cross the desert, and during the whole of this journey, they were walking in obedience to the will of God. This part of their trek was God-directed and therefore legitimate.

But once they reached Kadesh-Barnea, it was different. They rebelled against God and their leaders by despising and refusing to enter the Promised Land. This meant that the remainder of their desert wandering was contrary to the will of God and therefore illegitimate. The results were disastrous.

Israel's experience is duplicated in the lives of worldly Christians who do not go on to maturity. In a word, Paul's problem with the Corinthian church was worldliness. Their attitudes and reactions were worldly and not spiritual. They were fascinated by the more flamboyant spiritual gifts, while at the same time they tolerated grave abuses and open sin in their midst and allowed it to go unchecked. Envy, strife, party spirit, division, immorality, lawsuits between believers, and disorders at the Lord's table were all evidences of their carnal condition. They were "men of flesh," controlled not by the Spirit, but the self-life. Their spiritual immaturity was manifested in their reactions as well as their actions.

Our actions do not necessarily reveal our true motivation, for they can be insincere, superficial, even hypocritical. Our reactions to the unexpected, when we have had no time to prepare ourselves beforehand, are much more revealing and much more likely to be accurate. Spiritual

immaturity is most clearly visible in our unrehearsed, unconscious reactions.

DIAGNOSIS OF SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY

The condition of the Corinthian church illustrates some of the traits of people who have failed to go on to maturity.

Arrested growth

The Corinthians had stopped growing and were static in their Christian experience—"mere infants in Christ," spiritual dwarfs. The main cause of their stunted condition was their feeble digestion. They could assimilate only the milk of the Word of God. Milk and meat are both divine provisions, but they are appropriate to different stages of the Christian life. Milk is the food suited to the infant, but "strong meat is for the mature."

Milk is predigested food that the babe receives secondhand from his or her mother, and the baby thrives on it. But the time comes when the child must be weaned and introduced to solids. The spiritually immature believer is one who has not been weaned from the "milk"—the elementary truths of the Word of God—but is still largely dependent for spiritual sustenance on the result of another's heart exercise and study of the Scriptures. The immature believer has never learned the art of drawing spiritual nourishment directly from his or her own study of Scripture and prayer. The spiritual babe has a poor digestion for unadorned Bible study and craves condiments to spice it up.

Unfortunately this craving is too often catered to, with the result that the spiritually immature person never progresses beyond a secondhand Christian experience. The spiritual infant is not able to stand on his or her own