

Disciple-making and Prayer

Years ago Warren Webster, a veteran missionary to Pakistan said, "If I had my life to live over again, I would spend it changing just a few lives." I love that quote because it reminds me on what's important. It's easy to be busy. It's difficult to make a lasting impact, and what Mr. Webster discovered is that nothing makes a lasting impact like changing a few lives; teaching a few people to follow Jesus who will then teach others. That's what Jesus told His disciples to do; to go and make more disciples and we are the result of what they did. I pray that Creekside becomes a congregation of disciple-makers; that helping another to grow in their faith in Christ will seem normal and that every Christian will be learning from someone and teaching someone; their children or a neighbor or somebody in their community group. Jesus has called every disciple to be a disciple-maker which means He has called us to do something we are completely incapable of doing. And that's why as we'll see today, we cannot separate disciple-making from prayer. We're just about finished with our series in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John; where Jesus compares our relationship with Him to a vine and its branches. The vine and the branches share the same life and Jesus says that just as the branches cannot bear fruit unless they abide or stay connected to the vine, so neither can we unless we stay connected to Him. We've talked about how to connect with Jesus; now we're talking about how connecting with Him produces the fruit of more disciples. We looked at how Jesus connected to the Father and how we connect to Him through prayer and today I want to look at the relationship of prayer to disciple-making. Jesus mentions prayer twice in John 15 and gives us two promises of answered prayer in John 15:7 and 16. In vs. 7 Jesus says that prayer is essential for fruit-bearing and disciple-making. In vs. 16, He says that fruit-bearing is essential if we want to see our prayers answered. If I fail to pray, I'll fail to bear fruit and if I fail to bear fruit, the prayers I do pray may go unanswered. Let's see why.

First, prayer is essential for disciple-making (which is the way we are interpreting fruit since fruit always refers to people in the Gospel of John.) Vs. 7 is the first time Jesus refers to prayer in John 15. *"If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you."* (15:7) Jesus continues to emphasize the one responsibility we have as branches: to abide and stay connected to Him and as we saw last week, we abide in Him as His words abide in us. I cannot follow Jesus without being regularly in the Scriptures because the Scriptures are the way He works in my life. If I divorce myself from the Scriptures, I divorce myself from Jesus. He is still in my life but my phone is turned off and I'm no longer listening to Him. *"If you abide in Me and My words abide in you..."* we would expect Jesus to say the same thing He said earlier in John 15, "you will bear much fruit for apart from Me you can do nothing." But He doesn't. This time Jesus adds, *"ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you."* Instead of repeating the promise of fruit if we abide in Him, Jesus promises that our prayers will be answered. So what's the connection between the fruit of disciple-making and answered prayer? Simply that we cannot make disciples or bear fruit without praying. In the context of John 15, I think we have to interpret the promise of vs. 7 to mean that if we abide in Christ, He will answer our prayers to be fruitful in making disciples – because there is no disciple-making apart from answered prayer. Vs. 7 doesn't confine Jesus' promise to only our prayers for fruitfulness but in the context, I think disciple-making is the focus.

One thing I've learned in over 40 years of disciple-making is that I cannot make a disciple. I can't bring anyone to Christ and I can't make any Christian grow. I can't change someone's heart or make them love God or want to change. Those things are beyond human capability. I couldn't make my children want to be Christians or to believe the Bible. Only God could do that. If you are a follower of Jesus today, it is not because of the home you were raised in or because you're so smart and you figured it out. If you love Christ today, it is only because God replaced your heart of stone with a heart of flesh and gave you a new heart to know Him and to keep His

commandments. Have you noticed that most unsaved people are blind to their condition? The gospel is the best possible news we could get and yet most people aren't interested in it. Most can't see the seriousness of their situation and when you try to explain it, they either smile and politely tell you that's nice that you found something to believe in; or they shake their head and feel sorry that any person in the 21st century could still believe this stuff. To us, these issues are vital but to them irrelevant. Even for Christians, the concerns of this world often outweigh their concerns for the next. Why is that? It is not an intellectual problem. It's a spiritual battle. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 4:3-4 *"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* The great enemy of God and of our soul blinds people to their need for Christ and to the good news of the gospel and to the great love God has for them. It's not that they won't understand, it's that they can't understand. That's why you can't argue anybody into the kingdom of God. The author of all that is evil has thrown a veil over their mind which prevents them from seeing the truth. And it is a condition of mind against which we have no power. God alone can remove that veil. That's why Jesus says in John 6:44 *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."* And again in John 6:65, *"For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."* Unless God draws us to Himself; unless God opens our blind eyes and grants us the repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, we can't come to faith. That's why when Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus replies, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but My Father who is in heaven."* (Matthew 16:15-17) That's why Jesus says in John 16:8, *"And when He (speaking of the Holy Spirit) comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."* By ourselves we are incapable of seeing how sinful we are or how righteous Christ is or how awful the coming judgment will be for those who are not clothed in Christ's righteousness. We are incapable of seeing the seriousness of our situation until the Spirit of God opens our eyes and reveals it to us. That's why John writes in John 1:12-13, *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, {even} to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."* Every spiritual birth is a miracle. Every conversion is the work of God. That's why Paul writes in Romans 9:16 *"So then it {does} not {depend} on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."* We can't bring anyone to Christ or make anyone grow in their relationship with Him. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. He is the only one who can save and the only one who can cause those who are saved to grow. We can't save ourselves and we can't save anybody else. We can't grow ourselves nor can we cause anyone else to grow – yet God calls us to labor alongside of Him in this work. So what can we do? We can pray.

The minute we get involved in bringing people to Christ and helping them to grow in their relationship with Christ, we have entered a spiritual battle and a spiritual battle must be fought with spiritual weapons. That's why true evangelism and true disciple-making begins with prayer. Prayer engages God's power in behalf of the lost and the blind. When I returned home from college following my sophomore year, I learned that the girl I had dated since high school had become a Christian; which meant very little to me at the time. I had abandoned the church when I left home for college and had lived a pretty wild and free life for the past couple of years. But that summer I accompanied my girlfriend to her Christian meetings on Sunday evenings because it gave me an excuse to get out of the house and spend time with her. To her great disappointment I was a jerk at those meetings. I argued with the Christians and pretended that I knew what I was talking about; and then badmouthed her friends to her following the meetings. I looked like the least likely person to ever come to Christ. Yet something was happening inside of me. For the first time, I began to recognize how empty and purposeless my life was and how phony and unlikeable I had become. For the first time I began to see myself clearly; lying, selfish and living for no one but myself. For the first time, I realized that I was my own biggest problem and that if Jesus could save me from myself and fill my awful emptiness, I would give Him a try. So one summer night as I lay in my bed, I prayed "Jesus, if You are really there, come into my life and make me what You want me to be." My life changed radically. I felt happy and a peace I had never experienced before. A great weight seemed to have been lifted off me. And I couldn't wait until the next meeting. One of the leaders approached me to answer some of the questions I had asked the previous week but I interrupted her. "I'm not really interested in those questions any more. I just asked Jesus into my life. What do I do now?" My girl friend and her friends were astounded at the change in me. I learned later that a women's bible study group that my girl friend had joined months before had been regularly praying for me. I didn't come to Christ because I figured it out. God drew me to Himself and He drew me to Himself through the

prayers of His people. That's the point of John 15:7. Prayer is essential in disciple-making because only Christ can produce the fruit of changed lives. Disciple-making is far more about pleading for souls than it is about pleading with souls. It is more about talking with God about men than about talking with men about God.

This changes the way we parent. If God promises to answer our prayers for others, then the most powerful thing we can do as parents is to pray for our children. Above everything else we do for our kids, parenting is praying and interceding for our kids that God will protect them, grow them, lead them and make them wise. Look at Job 1:4-10. *"Job's sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. (Job's kids are all grown and they had lots of family parties.) When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings {according to} the number of them all; for Job said, 'Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually. (Notice that Job sacrificed and prayed for each of his children continually. Why? He knew their weaknesses. He knew the dangers of living in this world and how vulnerable to sin and to being deceived they were. He didn't assume that because he was their dad, they would automatically love God. Job continually prayed for his kids because he knew how vulnerable they were. What were the results of all this praying? "Now there was a day when the sons of God (angels) came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, 'From where do you come?' Then Satan answered the LORD and said, 'From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.' The LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.' Then Satan answered the LORD, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side (including Job's children)? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.'" Want God to put a hedge of protection around you and your children? All you need to do is to ask continually. Do you pray for your children? How specifically? How often? My most important job as a parent is to pray for my kids and grandkids and I have seen God answer more of my prayers for my family than in any other area. From the time they were born, I have prayed daily that God will protect them from all attacks, abuse, abduction, accidents, illness and injury; from temptation, deception, the wrong people and sin. I've prayed for their intellectual growth, their physical growth, their social growth and their emotional growth. I've prayed that God will give them the right friends and protect them from the wrong ones; that He will make His will for their life clear; that He would cure them of procrastination, laziness, cowardice and irresponsibility. I prayed for the people they would marry and the children that would come as a result; and God has faithfully answered all of those prayers. Parenting is more than prayer but never less. God will be our ally, our coach and to do things in our kids that we are incapable of doing. If we want your children to be true disciples of Jesus, we need to stay connected to Jesus ourselves and then pray, pray and pray some more! Nothing can replace prayer in parenting.*

And nothing can replace prayer in evangelism. Paul writes about unbelieving Israel in Romans 9-11 and those who rejected Jesus as Messiah and yet in Romans 10:1 he writes, *"Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for {their} salvation."* Paul knew that only God can save and that God can save anybody. After all, God had saved Paul and no one hated Christ or the gospel more than he did. So Paul didn't write anyone off as far as the gospel went. Instead he prayed for their salvation. True evangelism begins with fervent prayer. Only God can draw people to Himself and remove the veil over their mind and convince them to believe. I learned long ago that I could not argue anybody into heaven. The gospel is foolishness to people until God opens their eyes. People can't imagine themselves believing in Jesus – until they do and that is the work of God. Apart from prayer, all our evangelistic efforts will fail; no matter how much we prepare, no matter how reasonable our arguments, no matter how winsome our presentation; because people's problem with Christianity isn't intellectual – its spiritual and only God can impart the faith they need to trust in Jesus. George Mueller built orphanages in England in the 1800's, and filled them with thousands of orphans whom he housed, fed and clothed year after year simply by praying. Mueller wanted people to see that the God of the Bible is the same God today. Mueller had two non-believing friends for whom he prayed for 50 years. One became a Christian just before Mueller died and other just after he died. Can you imagine praying for someone's salvation for 50 year? Mueller did and God answered those prayers. Here's a little tool that I've recently discovered that's helpful in praying for people to come to Christ. It's called Triple 5 praying; praying every day for 5 things for 5 people for 5 minutes. I pray for my neighbors five minutes every day and I pray for five things: that God will soften their hearts toward Christ, convict them of their sins and of their need for a Savior, open their eyes to His goodness, kindness and mercy, remove any obstacles in them to

coming to faith, and give me the opportunity to serve them and to share the good news of Jesus with them. I just began to do this a couple of weeks ago and I've already had more opportunities to connect with a couple of them than I've had in months. God loves lost people and He wants them to come to Him far more than we do. He only asks us to pray and to believe in their behalf and when we do, we begin to see the fruit of new disciples of Jesus.

Nothing can replace prayer in parenting or in evangelism; nor can anything replace prayer in disciple-making. I remember reading about a missionary who was responsible for such a large area, he was only able to visit about half of the little churches in that area each year and so he prayed regularly for the ones he was unable to visit. The following year, he visited those churches he felt like he had been forced to neglect the previous year and was surprised to see how much more the members of those churches had grown in their walks with Christ than had the members of the churches he had visited. We connect with Jesus through prayer and Jesus bears fruit through us when we pray. That's why there is such an emphasis in the New Testament on praying for one another.

"And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which {comes} through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1:9-11)

Most of Paul's letters to the churches reveal how much Paul prayed for them. Paul knew he couldn't make them grow; only God could. But Paul could pray and his letters are filled with specific prayers for each congregation. If all growth comes from God but I'm not praying for the people I am discipling, then do I really care if they grow or not? The fact is, people become apathetic toward Christ; they are distracted by the pressures and the pleasures of everyday life; they get scared and obsess over the temporary rather than the eternal; and they get mad at God and mad at each other. The weight of the world, the flesh and the devil are constantly pulling them backwards. If you pour your life into people to help them to grow, it often feels like one step forward and two steps back; and that's why a lot of disciple-makers eventually give up. It's easy to give into cynicism and to give up on this seemingly impossible task. But before we do, we need to ask ourselves, "How faithful have I been in praying for this person?" John writes in 1 John 5:16, *"If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit a sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this."* John says that if you see your brother or sister committing a sin which doesn't kill them, pray for them and God promises to give them life and to bring them back to Himself. A Christian can never sink so low or wander so far that the prayers of their brothers and sisters can't bring them back. Instead of judging or quitting or thinking, "It's no use. They don't listen to me. They're going to do whatever they want," pray. Don't commit yourself to helping another Christian to grow spiritually without committing yourself to pray regularly for them as well. There is no disciple-making without prayer because only Jesus can make a disciple. That's the point of vs. 7 of John 15. There is no disciple-making without prayer.

There's a second promise of answered prayer in John 15:16. *"You did not choose Me but I chose you and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you."* The first promise showed us that prayer is essential for disciple-making. This promise shows us that disciple-making is essential for answered prayer. Prayer is always a great mystery. Why do some people have their prayers answered and other people not so much? Why does God answer some of our prayers and not others? The most common answer I hear is, "Because what you asked for wasn't in God's will." Let's look at 1 John 5:14-15, *"And this is the confidence which we have before Him that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him."* Notice that this is a verse about how to be confident that when you ask God for something, He will give it to you and John says, "Just make sure you ask according to God's will." Some people interpret "asking according to His will" as asking for things it is God's will for us to have. But if that's the way we interpret this verse, how can we have any confidence in prayer at all since we often don't know what is

God's will for us to have or not to have. Well, there's another way to interpret "praying according to God's will." Praying according to God's will doesn't refer to what we pray for but rather how we pray. The reason our prayers aren't answered isn't because we asked for the wrong things. The reason our prayers aren't answered is that we asked in the wrong way or we didn't meet the qualifications for answered prayer. The problem isn't what I ask for; the problem is who is doing the asking. The Bible places no limitations on WHAT we can pray for. Notice that Jesus says in vs. 16 "that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you." What is God's will for me to pray for? Whatever, anything, all things that I ask in prayer believing, I will receive. God puts no limit on what I can pray for. However, the scriptures are very specific about how we're to pray. Asking according to His will means asking in the way God has commanded us to ask; and that's Jesus' point in vs. 16. *"You did not choose Me but I chose you (the disciples thought they had chosen to follow Jesus but ultimately since no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him, Jesus chose them) and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit and that your fruit would remain..."* Jesus has chosen us not only for salvation and eternal life but to serve His purpose in the world; to be branches which bear fruit and disciple-makers who make disciples. Jesus chose us to be on His team and to bring others to Him, *"so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you."* So what is the connection between being chosen by Jesus to bear fruit and our prayers being answered? One of the conditions for answered prayer in the Bible is obedience. God is not our servant, we are His servants, and He answers the prayers of those who serve His purpose in the world. If I am living for my own purpose, my prayers will often go unanswered while if I'm living for His purpose, His ears are attentive to my requests. Let's look at 1 John 3:22-23. *"Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight."* How can I be confident in prayer? Obey His commandments. It is not what we ask for that determines whether our prayers are answered but whether we keep His commandments. It works the same way in your family. Your kid wants to use the family car on Saturday night. And with some anxiety and a lot of second thoughts, you reluctantly agree. Now if he brings the car home when he said he would, and there are no new dents and it's full of gas, you're probably going to say yes the next time he asks, right? But if he comes home two hours past curfew, with the tank is empty and there's a ding in the side of the door, well...he may be taking the bus for a while. The more I seek first His kingdom, His plan, and His purpose, the more whatever I ask I receive. The more I seek my own purpose, my own plan, my own pleasure, the less my prayers are answered – not because God loves me less but because He uses answered prayer to motivate me in to live for His purpose. That's why Jesus says in Matt. 6:33, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things – meaning all the things we need- will be added to you."* When we put God and His interests first, God takes care of our interests. When we put our own interests first, God lets us take care of those interests ourselves. There are things I've been asking God to do at Creekside for years which I haven't seen happen yet. And I realize that I've become fatalistic and settled for the way things are. I prayed and God didn't answer...must not have been His will. But as I read vs. 7 and vs. 16, I'm forced to ask, "Is it possible that the problem is not with what I'm asking for but with who is doing the asking?" Am I abiding in Christ as much as I could? Am I seeking Him as often as I could? Am I as obedient as I could be? No, I'm not and so I'm upping my game; spending more time with Him and looking at how I can serve His purpose more fully – not only for my own good but to see what happens with the things I'm asking Him to do; because vs. 16 seems to be saying that the more obedient I become to God's purpose of disciple-making, the more powerful I become in prayer.

Now it is important to note that we are not saved because we bear fruit. We bear fruit because we're saved. Christ saves us from and Christ saves us for. He saves us from hell and judgment and slavery to sin and He saves us for a life of joy, productivity and significance. That's redemption; redeeming what was worthless and making it valuable.