

Discipling

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A Brief Book Summary

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About the Author

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Introduction

Matthew ends his Gospel with the Great Commission from Christ in 28:18–20; the commission is a call to discipling. Discipling refers to how to help others follow Jesus. In this book, Mark Dever asks and answers three primarily questions related to discipling. He seeks to explain what discipling is all about. Second, he considers where discipling should take place. Third, he explains how we should disciple. The motives for discipling are the same for all ministry—love and obedience. Because we love God, we make disciples for Christ out of obedience. Recall that Jesus said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15, 23; 15:12–14). The goal of this book is to help Christians obey this command to make disciples.

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Part 1

What Is Discipling?

Chapter 1

The Inevitability of Influence

God never changes, but we change regularly. As we are influenced by someone or something, we change. Some claim to be “creatures of habit,” but we all change. We are born, we grow, we age, and then we die. Change can be a good or bad thing. Many of the writers of Scripture comment on this point: “Bad company ruins good morals” (1 Cor 15:33). The people around us will influence/change us for better or for worse. The question, then, is not if we will change; it is how we will, and how we plan to use the influence we have on others. This entire discussion relates to discipling in that it uses a gospel influence to make a gospel impact on people’s lives. Everyone should consider: how will we use our influence? Will we use it for discipleship or something else?

Chapter 2

Oriented toward Others

A focus on discipling is an orientation toward others, not ourselves primarily. Discipling labors in the power of God to proclaim Christ and present others mature in Christ. That is the pattern throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, God’s people were supposed to disciple one another with God’s Word in the home. Moses wrote: “And these words that I command you today shall be on your hear. You shall team them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut 6:6–7). The OT also contains examples of leaders discipling leaders; Moses raised up Joshua to succeed him. In the NT, Christ left an example of discipling. He chose the Twelve for this purpose. But, He chose to pour into three of them the most: Peter, James, and John. Later in the NT, Paul disciplined Timothy. Paul explained to 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 Tim 2:2). What does this look like for Christians today? Paul sums it up well in Colossians 1:28–29, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” Paul explained that he toiled and struggled for discipling; if we wish to disciple others, then so must we. True Christian faith is not lazy; it seeks to work hard. But, we only work because God is working in us. Thus, we have no reason for pride. It is all ultimately a work of God. Nevertheless, discipling remains the primary goal of ministry. Christians toil to proclaim Christ to present others mature in Christ. Discipling is also the way that the church will leave a true legacy—leaving “time-bombs of grace” to disciple others.

Chapter 3

The Work of Discipling

If our plan was to strengthen an early kingdom, we would probably think of doing so through battles, wars, fortunes, or works of political philosophy. Christ’s kingdom, however, is built through the work of discipling. This work consists of several parts. First, it necessarily involves initiating. Someone has to initiate a discipleship relationship; it can feel awkward at first. But, initiating may not be what one thinks; it may mean leading the way in confessing personal sin rather than appearing to be a wise sage. Second, discipling has different stages. It can begin with establishing a friendship with a non-Christian. But, it can also mean starting with a Christian who is young in the faith. Third, discipling consists primarily of teaching. In the context of the

local church, discipling takes place through the preaching of the Bible. Outside of the church, discipling takes place in spiritually meaningful conversations with one another. The content of the conversation can be about the previous week's sermon, what God has been teaching one another, etc. In the course of these conversations, a variety of topics and issues will surface. There may be a need for gentle correction about the choices he or she is making. Remember, the Great Commission is about making disciples who are obedient disciples; that is why Jesus instructed His disciples to teach people to obey what He said. This involves verbal instruction, but it also includes modeling what it means firsthand to others. Discipling, then, involves humility. None of us are perfect, we are all still in process of becoming more like Christ, and, yet, we are called to help others become more like Christ.

Chapter 4

Objections to Discipling

Although discipling is taught in the Bible, discipling is a concept to which some object. Objection 1: "This discipler is not ideal." That is, the person being disciplined rejects the person discipling because he thinks that the other person is not "good enough." The answer: "Neither are you." God is the only perfect one in the disciple-making equation. Objection 2: "If a person is always listening to her discipler, she might no longer submit to other good authorities like parents, husband, or church." The answer is that as long as discipleship is done well, it will encourage submission to any and all authorities God has established. Objection 3: "This whole thing seems self-centered and prideful." Although discipling could *seem* like that, it calls people to follow the other person in so far as he or she is following Christ. It is not focused on the discipler per se. Objection 4: Isn't it pushy, and aren't you imposing yourself on someone else?" This objection would only be true if the discipling relationship was not a mutually agreed upon relationship. In this model, it is. Objection 5: "I don't need it" or "I'm too busy." These kinds of responses come from someone who holds the "Lone Ranger" mentality; they think they are separate individuals entirely and, as such, do not need a local church. Nevertheless, when we are adopted through Christ, we become part of the local church. We *need* discipling because we are part of the church. Christianity is not simply a private issue. Objection 6: "This is just for extroverts." Although they may thrive on it in their personality, they are not the only people in mind; discipling is for everyone without exception. Objection 6: "I can't disciple. I'm imperfect, erring, and too young!" If, however, we are truly following Christ, all we need to do is share what we know, not what we don't know. We need to be authentic with where we are at. We need to remember that someone has done this for us along the way; Christ calls us to be a discipler for others also.

Part 2

Where Should We Disciple?

Chapter 5

The Local Church

Discipleship can happen in many different places. For example, on college/university campuses, sometimes parachurch ministries play an important role in providing discipleship. But, the primary place for discipleship is the local church. It does this through its weekly gatherings

accountability structures, its elders, and its members. The local church uses the preaching, teaching, and other proclamation ministries like the Lord's Supper to make disciples. Thus, when people gather together every week, they are doing so for the purpose of discipling one another. The writer of Hebrews makes that connection in 10:24–25 when he encourages Christians to encourage one another. This context is also important for recognizing who is a disciple and who is not. Christ gave the local church the authority to affirm who should be part of the local church and who should not be. The local church affirms who the disciples are in two ways: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is a formal sign that someone is a disciple. The Lord's Supper is the meal for disciples as part of the local church. In sum, in the NT, the local church is at the very center of discipleship, not an optional part.

Chapter 6

Pastors and Members

Each Christian plays a part in discipleship, but pastors also play an important role. First, pastors disciple and equip disciplers with God's Word so they can disciple. The NT describes the fundamental role of the pastor or elder as discipling by teaching God's Word. This ministry is so central to a pastor's role that if someone finds themselves in a church that is not teaching God's Word, then they are wasting their time. They are not being disciplined like they should be. Second, pastors lead in baptism and the Lord's Supper. These ministries are closely tied to the ministry of the Word. The Supper proclaims Christ's death until He returns (1 Cor 11:26). Pastors should lead in these areas to teach and hold people accountable. They can use questions like "How did you become a Christian?" and "What is the gospel?" Third, pastors provide an example. Paul told the Corinthians: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). That is why Paul explains the qualifications for becoming a pastor/elder/overseer so clearly in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. Christians are supposed to imitate the lives of pastors. But, pastors are not the only people who play an important role.

The members also play an important role. First, they should receive and support the pastor's ministry. The church is supposed to support the pastor so he can focus on his teaching ministry (1 Tim 5:17). They should also follow his lead. Second, at times, however, congregation should reject the pastor's ministry. If the pastor is not teaching the Word of God, then the congregation should reject him. Third, members are also responsible for one another. They are responsible to make sure that they obey the "one another" commands in Scripture for each other.

Ultimately, everyone in the local church plays a role in discipleship. It is not just the pastors or the members—it is everyone's "job." Therefore, the church should seek to build a culture of discipleship. Both pastors and members should strive to see a culture like that develop. Everyone has some sort of struggle in their lives; maybe it is their lack of evangelism, problems in their marriage, difficulties with their children, financial issues, and so on. Nevertheless, God has so designed the local church to help with discipleship that there is no better place for it to happen.

Part 3

How Should We Disciple?

Chapter 7

Choose Someone

It is clear that discipling is biblical and important, but how do we do it? The first step is an obvious one: we should choose someone. First, we should begin with our families. Christians are called to provide not only for their family's financial needs but their spiritual needs. Second, we need to consider the spiritual state of people we seek to disciple. We cannot hope to disciple a lost person the same way we do a converted person. Third, we need to look at the church membership of the local church we are part of. We have a greater responsibility for them than we do Christians outside of our local church. Fourth, we need to consider the gender of the person. Men should disciple men and women should disciple women; in public settings, pastors and church leaders disciple both, but they should not do so in private. Fifth, the age of the person should be taken into account. Scripture is as sensitive to gender as it is to age. Typically, the younger people should learn from the older; however, there are exceptions, primarily for pastors. Recall that Timothy was a younger pastor who should not let his youth be despised (1 Tim 4:12, 5:1). Sixth, the person chosen for discipling should be different than the person discipling. People tend to gravitate to people like themselves; but, seeking people different than oneself allows for further growth on both sides. Seventh, the person should be teachable; it is going to be hard to disciple someone who does not want to learn anything. Eighth, potential disciples should be people who are willing to disciple others; they are not disciplined just for themselves—it is supposed to be an ongoing process. Ninth, proximity and schedules also matter. People need to make the best use of their time (Eph 5:16), and selecting someone whose schedule lines up with yours will certainly help make good use of time.

Chapter 8

Have Clear Aims

Once the discipling has begun, clear aims need to be set to guide the time. Otherwise two people might spend time together but it could just be hanging out, not discipling. The first aim is the *life-truth-life* pattern. This aim consists of people being attracted to your life, your teaching should then work for their transformation, and then their transformed life should illustrate what was taught. The understanding of the teaching should be realized in their lives. One way to begin is to ask good, open-ended questions: what are your interests, backgrounds, proclivities, sin patterns, hurts, fears, hopes, and more? In essence, the *how* of discipling is not all that difficult. Getting the first things first about who to choose is often the more difficult part.

Chapter 9

Pay the Cost

As with all of life, some of the best things come at a cost. So also with discipling. First, it takes time, and lots of it. It is hard to put a strict time table on discipling. Second, it requires study. As you spend time in God's Word together, the person being disciplined will likely have questions—maybe even some you do not readily know the answers to. That will require study on your part. Third, discipling requires prayer. Paul instructs Christians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Discipling requires regular prayer. Fourth, discipling requires love. It takes love to initiate a discipling relationship, persevere in a discipling relationship, receive the criticism that often

comes in a discipling relationship, humbly show love in a discipling relationship, and end discipling relationships when the aims have been met or some other life situation changes, e.g., someone moves. As difficult as discipling may seem, Christians are called to practice it as they become more like Christ.

Chapter 10

Raising up Leaders

There are different kinds of people that Christians should disciple; some are church members, and others are members with the prospect of leadership. There are nine steps toward discipling leaders. First, the place to begin is by shepherding toward biblical qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Second, pastors should always be on the lookout for potential leaders to disciple. Third, discipling will require personal time. Fourth, advancing trust to these potential leaders will be important for their growth. It is likely that at some point in time someone did that for you. Fifth, responsibility should be delegated to this individual. To grow, they need opportunities to lead, lose votes and arguments, and cultivate respect for other leaders. Sixth, leaders-in-training require feedback. Just because someone else has an accurate assessment of their progress does not mean that they can read their minds. Seventh, godly authority should be encouraged. Eighth, clarity in their teaching and doctrine should be expected. Ninth, a culture of humility should be fostered. Envy can ruin a potential leader.

Conclusion

Jonathan Leeman

Usually an author writes their own conclusion. Jonathan Leeman, however, asked to write the conclusion; he has seen Dever's ministry and served alongside him. In the conclusion, then, Leeman offers some practical advice of what Dever's book looks like in practice. Leeman explains that Dever does an excellent job of practicing authority and giving it away. Practicing authority refers to treating the work that needs to be and the decisions that need to be made belong to that individual. It involves taking initiative, taking control, making decisions, and ensuring the job gets done. Giving out authority can be done in several ways. First, building the church on the gospel focuses the church on the main message. Second, establishing a plurality of staff and non-staff elders helps disrupt hierarchies. Third, being willing to lose elder votes gives authority away. Fourth, limiting the percentage that the Senior Pastor preaches will give some authority away; Mark limits himself to 50 to 65 percent. This chapter outlines many other ways. Each example intentionally shows how to give away authority. Doing this has many benefits. First, it helps keep the gospel at the uttermost. Second, it promotes real relationships. Third, it keeps a church from becoming tribalistic. Fourth, it helps church members share resources. Fifth, it destroys natural social hierarchies. Sixth, it cultivates trust. Seventh, it cultivates teachability and the willingness to receive criticism. Eighth, it promotes a willingness to forgive. Ninth, it encourages the church to be training-minded. Tenth, it helps a church become outward focused; if the focus is on discipling and giving away authority to the disciples, then people will begin to become naturally focused on sharing the gospel with the lost for the sake of discipleship. Consider this: Christ has shared His authority with us in that He allows us to participate in the task of discipling. We, then, need to learn from Christ as we make disciples.

