Thoughts on discipleship

Matt 28:19-20

All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. NIV

What is a disciple?

Adam and Eve were children of God, the first "people of God." The Lord commanded them to be fruitful and to fill the earth, and to subdue it, to take dominion over it. Adam named all the animals and he was to cultivate the garden of Eden. The garden was the center of the earth, and from there, the human race was to expand outward. The first couple walked with God, an expression that means that they lived in harmony or according to his will. So, we see that God's will was for man to be in relationship with Him so he could continually live under His blessing, receiving His counsel, His power, direction, and carrying out His purpose or mission for them.

Sin entered and they were cast out and everything fell under the curse. Satan became the god of this age. Human understanding was darkened, and instead of seeking the Lord and his kingdom, his ways for everything, they followed their own ways, not realizing that they were really those of the devil, their enemy. (Ecc. 7:28)

Abraham was called as the first member of a new community, a new people of God. He walked westward, against the current (everyone had gone eastward before). He made altars and worshipped the true God, became a friend of God, justified by his faith, walked in obedience to God and was blessed and made a blessing. As we saw two weeks ago, the image of God was seen in Abraham, when he offered his son on the altar in true worship, so this is God’s plan – that all humans would reflect His image in them. These altars and this worship were the center or the foundation of his life and testimony, and later, of Isaac and Jacob as well.

Then, their descendants multiplied, went to Egypt for more than 400 years, and finally, God miraculously rescued them with great wonders and signs, they passed through the Red Sea (which was their baptism), and then, they arrived at Mount Sinai, where God gave them their covenant, the first covenant that we call the OT, by which they were made God's chosen people, as Abraham was the first chosen man. The covenant was called the Torah, which means the law, but also, instruction.

The idea was, these people were redeemed from slavery to their enemies by the power of God, and then, they had to learn a new way of life. Through that instruction, the tabernacle, and the priesthood, they were to relate to God and He was to dwell within their encampment. Their lives were to be made conformable to God's ways so that they could continue in relationship and live according to His will.

So, we can say that they entered into a discipleship relationship under God, as individuals, but also as a nation. They were to learn His ways (live like Him) and keep in contact with Him continually, as the only people in all the earth in such a relationship. No other nation was like Israel, with their God in their midst, protecting, blessing, directing. The tabernacle was the center of their encampment, showing that relationship with God was their foundation.

Then God gave them their own land, the Promised Land. In the course of time, God gave them a king, and taught them that the king was to rule as God’s representative, carefully following the covenant (Deut. 17). David was the king after God's own heart, and he made plans for his son Solomon to build God’s temple. The temple became the center of Israel's national life. And it is interesting that Israel was at the center between Africa, Asia, and Europe, the center of the world at that time, so as to influence and disciple the other nations.

To have the temple, or before that, the tabernacle, and even before that, the altars as the center shows us that the relationship we have with God is or should be our first priority. The spiritual, the connection with God is the center. Prov. 4:23 says, "Above all things, guard your heart, for out of it flows life."

But it is important to know that being part of God's people was not just about temple worship. All of this was the foundation, yes, but not the whole. The Torah or instruction addresses many areas of life, not just one. In fact, the Ten Commandments are not just about the relationship we have with God. Only the first 4 have to do directly with relationship to God.

The next 6 have to do with our relationships with other people. **Honor your parents**, the importance of family, **thou shalt not kill**, which demonstrates the sacredness of life, (this is why we are pro-life, against abortion, murder, we value and esteem life), then **thou shalt not commit adultery**, the sanctity of marriage, that is, loyalty, faithfulness, purity of mind and heart, then **thou shalt not steal**, which demonstrates the principle of personal property, be it land, money, possessions, or even talents, skills, etc. Next, **thou shalt not bear false witness**, which demonstrates the importance of speaking the truth, honesty, law and order, etc. And lastly, **thou shalt not covet**, which teaches control of the mind and heart, we’ll give an account to God, staying away from evil, and learning to thank Him and cultivate an attitude of gratitude and contentment.

So, it all starts on the inside, with character and morality. But then, the Bible teaches principles about the external also, our actions, what we do in the world. Adam was going to cultivate the garden; Israel was going to take dominion over its territory and interact with other nations. So, the Bible teaches principles like servant leadership, government, law, citizenship, stewardship of possessions and finances, being frugal, investing, principles about how to raising children and education in general, principles about the gifts and abilities God gives us and how to cultivate them, etc., etc., etc. The Bible teaches us to fear God and seek His wisdom about everything and lets us know that wisdom is learning to live life as God wants us to live it. There are principles of agriculture, the sciences, politics, family, sexuality, divorce, in fact, almost every area of human life!

God's first people entered into covenant with God and entered into a process of discipleship. What was the goal or objective of that? The same goal God had for Adam and Eve, i.e., to return to what God originally intended for the human race, to be like God, to reflect His image, and to take dominion over His creation.

Israel obeyed to a certain extent, but they did not continue in God's ways, because it was God's plan to demonstrate through them the inability of the flesh and the need for a new covenant of grace and the Spirit. However, we can see the idea and goal of discipleship in the example of Israel's history.

Now, when Jesus came the first time, He came to die for our sins and provide the wages of sin, that is, He came to pay the debt that we could never have paid. His death on the cross was a sacrifice of atonement, to atone, to remove, to erase, to cleanse us from the curse of sin. But this was not the end, but the beginning.

From his early days of ministry, Christ not only healed the sick and cast out demons. He also called disciples. To what did He call them? To enter into relationship with Him and learn from Him His way of life. And what was this way of life? It was nothing more than the life that God always intended for human beings to live. In other words, Jesus called people back to God's purpose and goal for humanity. He was the last Adam.

This goal cannot be realized apart from God. So, it was first necessary to see that they were separated from God, that they had sinned, and had to return to Him through repentance. That is why John the Baptist came first to call them to repentance, and when Jesus began His ministry, He also began by calling them to repentance. The word means to turn back, to turn around, to change one's way of thinking and the direction of one's life.

Then, He gave them His new Torah from the mountain, not from Sinai, but the mount next to Galilee. He taught them to love God and to love their neighbor. He taught them about worship in spirit and truth. In other words, the spiritual first, but then, much more. He taught about government, citizenship duties, taxes, marriage, sexuality, family, interpersonal relationships, finances and stewardship, servant leadership.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus sent out his apostles, and with their words, actions and writings, which formed the NT, they began to make disciples in many parts of the earth. They wrote the epistles, which teach much more about almost every area of life, including what will happen after this life in the future.

Through their writings, they, along with the Spirit and the words and example of Jesus himself, continued the work of calling and making disciples.

Under the New Testament or covenant, we have advantages that God's first people never had. We have the very Spirit of God dwelling within us. God's laws are written in our minds and hearts. This increases many times over our capacity to live in relationship with God and walk according to His ways and His will.

With Abraham, the center was the altar. With Moses, the tabernacle. Later, it was the temple. But we are God's temple, and He dwells within us. As always, the spiritual comes first. Everything flows from the heart, and apart from Christ, we can do nothing. He is the Vine and we are the branches. A disciple is a person in daily contact with God, because in this way he can receive the flow of divine life, receive correction and forgiveness, but also, in this way he receives his power to live differently, his direction to know the way, etc. So, in the church, we teach the spiritual, worship, repentance, prayer, God's commandments, morality, etc.

But brothers and sisters, the spiritual, the internal, is not the whole. The Christian life encompasses the external as well. In fact, it encompasses every area of life; sexuality, the body, interpersonal relationships, marriage, family, parenting, education, business, government, finances, citizenship, our work, gifts, and abilities, crime, the law, governmental and church authority, etc., etc., etc. (Individual, family, church, state.)

And what is the goal or objective of discipleship? It is simply to return to God's original intent, His plan and purpose for the human race from creation. He created us to bear His image and become like Him. He created us to walk with Him daily to fellowship and receive our direction, energy, the very life of God, flowing in us.

Christ redeemed us, bought us back from the vanity of our lives, to put us back on the path to God. And the plan is not just about individuals and the inner, spiritual, moral life, but about families, the church, communities, and even whole nations.

In one of his parables, the Lord said that the kingdom was like the leaven that a woman puts in a batch of dough. That small amount of leaven causes the whole batch to rise. In the same way, we Christians are to live in this world as influencers, leading the way, influencing those around us to turn to God and live as He wants them to. This is making disciples of all nations!

The Lord wants to work from the inside out, starting in the heart of the individual, but then influencing every sphere outward in ever-widening concentric circles. Glory to His name!

God has a plan and a purpose for us, and it involves more than singing songs in a church or learning to pray and stay away from sin. It starts with those things, and they are foundational.

But being a disciple is more than just personal devotion. It means we also have a job to do in this world, and each of us has a part. It has to do with both being and doing. To be saints and followers of Christ, yes. But also to be fathers and mothers, employees and employers, citizens of the community and the nation.

We must be learning God's ways to manage our bodies and our finances, our families and our work, our gifts and our talents, and we must influence others around us so that we end up influencing this entire nation.

Let's rise up and do our part! Let's understand the big picture of what discipleship should be, and let's make a firm commitment to God’s will for us. We will surrender ourselves to Him and become disciples ourselves, and let Him work in and through us to make disciples of others. In this way, we disciple even our nation and others as well!

This was the original intent for Adam, Eve, and the human race. It was the intent for Israel. And today, it is still God's intention for His church.

I’ll conclude with a passage from Ephesians 4:13-16

Eph. 4:13 until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, deceiving by the cunning craftiness of deceit; 15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him who is the head, even Christ; 16 From whom the whole body, being fitted and knit together by every joint, helping one another according to the effectual working of every part, may grow up into the edifying of itself in love.