

## The Need for Real Discipleship

*Follow Jesus' example to see real life transformation in your group.*

Michael C. Mack

If Dr. Emmett Brown allowed you to borrow his DeLorean and take it back to 28 AD, you could ask Jesus' disciples what exactly it means to be a disciple in Jesus' small group. What would they say? What would you see them doing?

Fortunately, you don't need the flux capacitor to answer these questions. We only need to open our Bibles to the Gospels. First of all, you'll notice that the disciples talk a lot about their rabbi. In their context, a disciple was someone who was totally committed to a particular rabbi, or teacher. Usually disciples lived with their rabbi and followed him everywhere. Communal living was absolutely necessary for living as a true disciple. Teaching happened more by example as you lived with the person each day. The purpose was to become "like the teacher" (Luke 6:40).

Rabbis used no written curriculum or agenda for their multi-year discipling experience. Their curriculum was life itself. The rabbi observed the daily life of his disciples and then asked probing questions to initiate discussion about observed behaviors. A disciple could also initiate conversations by raising an issue regarding his observation of the rabbi's life or some life issue or question.

Jesus adopted the rabbinic style of discipling his followers, but he altered it quite a bit. John 15:12–17 illustrates seven ways Jesus was countercultural as a rabbi. As you look through this list, consider how his pattern for discipling applies to your small group:

1. Rabbis trained their disciples in the law, while Jesus' discipleship was based on grace: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (v. 12).
2. Rabbis required a short-term commitment, but Jesus called his disciples to total surrender of their lives: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13).
3. Rabbis required their disciples to serve them in practical ways (think "wax on, wax off"). Jesus, on the other hand, treated his disciples as friends: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants" (vv. 14, 15).
4. Rabbis were chosen by their potential disciples, and then it was up to the rabbi to say yes or no. But Jesus called his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (v. 16).
5. Rabbis focused on head knowledge so that their disciples could eventually teach others in the Jewish religion, yet Jesus called his disciples to actually do something: "I . . . appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (v. 16).
6. Rabbis taught their followers to be dependent on them, while Jesus taught his disciples to be dependent on God: "Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (v. 16).
7. Rabbis used a top-down approach to discipleship, but Jesus' method involved mutual discipleship: "This is my command: Love each other" (v. 17).

Jesus' style of discipleship requires more than just attending a weekend church service and showing up for a once-a-week small group—it plays out in our everyday lives. It happens in your quiet time, work time, family time, and play time—every time of every day.

## The Need for Real Discipleship

Let's stop for a moment to consider the state of our world. As I write this, terrorism against Christians is growing in the world. The numbers of jihadists are growing daily. Threats in the United States are becoming more and more real.

Christians in America *talk* about being persecuted, but we have no idea what it really means to face persecution, especially as compared to what our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are facing. They understand what Jesus meant when he talked about counting the cost of being his disciple.

Let's get real. Our Christianity is mostly comfortable and cheap—there's very little cost involved. We choose our small groups like a consumer choosing a new car or a gym membership: Is it convenient? Does it meet the needs of me and my family? What will I get out of it?

That's not discipleship.

We need to wake up. We may soon know what it's like to count the costs of our faith in very real ways. The question is: How many of us will stand up for Christ when we are forced to decide—with a gun to our head or a sword at our throat?

I believe we're right now at a point of decision. We need to boldly move into true discipleship, moving

- from program-based discipleship approaches to relational strategies and processes
- from discipleship as an option for some church goers to discipleship as a high priority for all
- from sitting and listening to boldly, actively going out into the world with the gospel
- from retention to sending strategies
- from assimilation to mission as the purpose of small groups
- from discipleship being the means for filling us up to it being the channel for us overflowing the grace of God

## Making Disciples as Jesus Made Disciples

Let's look at the principles Jesus used as he made disciples. You may not consider yourself a rabbi—not even a teacher—but the fact is that you are a discipler. Forget Jesus' title as "Rabbi." Think of him as a mentor, shepherd, and friend, because those are the roles Jesus played as he disciplined his followers.

**Discipleship is relational.** It's much more than a study or a program. Disciples must build trusting relationships with those they are discipling, and this can only be accomplished intentionally. Consider gathering a group of three that you will intentionally get to know better and invest in. Jesus focused his discipling on three men: Peter, James, and John. He didn't ignore the other nine, but he wisely focused on only three men to get the best results. Let's destroy the myth that you can disciple ten to twelve people. It can't be done. Even Jesus knew he needed to focus on just a few. You can't do what even Jesus didn't try to do! Focus on your two or three as part of your core team and then let them invest into two or three others in the group.

**Discipleship is a high priority.** Are people in your group committed? Jesus always called for a high commitment from his followers. He let people who wouldn't make that commitment walk away. Be sure people in your group are committed to three things: Christ, the group, and mutual discipleship. Their highest priority, of course, is their relationship with Christ. Your group is one of the main ways they will live out that priority to Christ—community with one another is a non-negotiable for anyone who desires to be a disciple of Christ. Biblical community is the environment where disciples grow in their faith.

Commitment to the group means being at, and fully involved in, group meetings. It means putting group members' needs above their own (Philippians 2:3–4). Mutual discipleship means we are willing to help others in the group grow. We're like peer coaches. We listen to one another and encourage each other to follow Christ wholeheartedly. We don't come to the group just to consume discipleship—we're fellow disciplers in the process. We ask each other hard questions and lovingly support each other.

**Discipleship is active.** Discipleship is more than just learning. It's doing. It's serving. It's leading. Jesus and his group did not sit around week after week doing Bible studies. They put God's Word into action as they went and ministered together to hurting people. They witnessed Jesus' incredible compassion, and they became more and more compassionate. They watched Jesus heal people, and they learned how. They were at first shocked when Jesus spoke to Samaritans, women, and others who were looked down upon by the culture at large, but then they learned to reach out to all kinds of people who needed love and a touch from God. Their commission from Jesus was to *go* and make disciples. We can't make disciples holed up in our living rooms separated from the mission. Jesus knew that people grow most when they are involved in mission. Let's go!

Years ago when I worked in downtown Cincinnati, a newspaper called *The Downtowner* interviewed people for a feature they called Miss or Mr. Downtowner. One of the questions for a particular Miss Downtowner was, "What is one thing you'd most like to see?"

"More homeless shelters," responded Miss Downtowner.

Later in the interview she was asked, "What would you do if you won the lottery?"

She said, "I'd buy an island and throw a huge party for all my friends."

Miss Downtowner said she had a passion for the poor, but she wasn't willing to count the cost herself. When provided the opportunity, she would do something for herself and her friends. Miss Downtowner is a sad illustration of many small groups. Who does your group exist for? This is a decision you must make: to care only for yourselves or trust God and break out to engage with Jesus in his mission.

**Discipleship is missional.** Your small group doesn't have to be a holding tank for the already-convinced. A disciple-making small group is more like a flowing river than an aquarium. Small groups that are used simply for church retention or assimilation will not be the types of groups who are making disciples of all nations, much less the 10 or 12 people sitting in the group meetings. Small groups are not soft landing places where Christians should feel comfortable and unopposed. They are environments where God is actively reaching lost people and discipling them—raising them up to go out and reach more lost people. Yes, this is costly, just as Jesus would want it to be.

McCook Christian Church in Nebraska had this in mind when they started a new Bible study group and handed out flyers at places like daycare centers and women's shelters. "We wanted to reach the ladies who we could really minister to," said church member Kim Tietz. They could have done what most groups choose to do and invite only other women from the church, but instead they did what Jesus would do. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor," he said, "but the sick" (Luke 5:31).

**Discipleship is overflow.** What God pours into you, you naturally overflow into others, and then they overflow that same love and grace into others. Disciple-making small groups are places where the words of the apostle Paul get lived out: "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). A small group leader who simply hosts or facilitates doesn't take on the vital responsibilities that are needed today to make disciples. It takes a shepherd, a mentor, a discipler.

Here's the good news: You take on those roles only as God leads, shepherds, and disciples you! Your job is to overflow what he is pouring into your life into others. That means your biggest responsibility by far is to spend time with God daily. Put yourself into a position where he can flow into you, and you will naturally overflow into others. If you feel unqualified, consider the disciples in the early church were known as unschooled and ordinary (Acts 4:13). And the astonished religious leaders noted that they had "been with Jesus." All they had was Jesus. And that was enough. It's enough for you and your group members, too.

—*Michael C. Mack is the founder of SmallGroups.com. He currently serves as an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and works as a church consultant; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.*

## **Discuss**

1. How have you seen discipleship in small groups fall short of this description of real discipleship?
2. Why do you think we struggle so much with discipleship?
3. What motivates you to find effective ways to disciple your group members?