

THE FIRST DISCIPLE IS YOU

The Easter 2024 Message

Nevada County Servants of Christ

Walkthroughscripture.com

We hear “He is Risen” every Easter, and as Christians we rejoice. While it’s true that our Easters include the time for fanciful, fictional stories of a bunny who hides eggs for children, brunches with relatives and friends, and enough candy that we worry whether we’ll still fit into our jeans by the time the holiday is over. However, the heart of Easter still remains this one thing: Jesus Christ and His sacrificial, life-giving death on the cross. Yes, life-giving—it was His death on the cross that makes possible our hope for life in God’s eternal kingdom.

Let’s start by looking at the story of the first Easter morning as recounted by the Apostle Matthew in chapters 27-28.

⁵⁷ As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first. “Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

¹¹ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ 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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Christians are familiar with this final passage, known as the Great Commission. For many of us, this call seems overwhelming: Me? Disciple the nations? Disciple others? Doesn't Jesus know I can't get my own act together? How would I do that when I can't even manage making dinner, getting the kids to bed, paying my bills, and oh yeah finding time to do the good Christian things like studying my Bible and praying and journaling and all those things I'm taught at church to do every day? Disciple others? Anyone who didn't believe in Jesus would take one look at my messy life and ask what's so holy about me that they should take my advice on eternal life?

Yeah, we have those thoughts. So, my first response is this: Jesus loves you, so love yourself and give yourself a break. He doesn't expect your life to be perfect, and He doesn't expect perfection from you. If humans had the capacity

to be perfect, we wouldn't be sitting here now talking about Jesus dying on a cross to atone for our sins and transgressions. Relax, He gets it. When we're truly grieved that we have disappointed God and sincerely ask His forgiveness, He is gracious and loving to grant that forgiveness.

"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29)

Still, He does want you to disciple people in His name...and guess what? The first person that Jesus wants you to disciple is YOU.

You have to start somewhere, right? The fact that you're sitting here trying to discover what Easter, Jesus, and the Great Commission is all about is actually step one.

I'm going to preface this by saying that what follows is not a checklist of tasks that will earn your approval by Jesus and your place in eternal life. Forgiveness, justification, sanctification, and salvation are GIFTS of God's grace that were earned only by JESUS and His life-giving death on the cross. Salvation is not accomplished by self-works of men, except for this: Believing in Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of Man, and receiving Him as your Savior.

But, here's the kicker: This should not be a "one and done" thing: Say yes to Jesus and go on about your life without being affected or seeing any difference. When Jesus rose from the dead on that first Easter, He brought with him the chance for all of us to enter into that new life with Him. The person who hasn't received Jesus is spiritually dead in sin, facing eternal death and separation from God. For the person who says yes to Jesus as Savior, Easter is your (re)birthday—the day that your new life was made possible.

That should be joyful news, so much so that Jesus expects that we'll desire for other people to have the same chance to receive this gift. This happens in two ways: The words we say to others about Jesus and the actions of how we live our life. This is not an instance where actions speak louder than words; both are key components of discipling the world. It starts in you, so here's the rundown of making yourself the first person that you disciple for Christ.

STEP ONE: YOU HAVE TO *KNOW* JESUS TO DECIDE TO *FOLLOW* JESUS.

If someone becomes a permanent part of our lives, it usually involves an introduction followed by spending time getting to know that person, building up feelings of affection for that person, and inviting that person to be a part of our lives. It's no different with the Lord: Developing a relationship with Jesus means putting in the time to get to know who He is, what He says, and allowing all of that to become a part of our lives.

STUDY THE WORD. The best way to get to know God and Jesus is to read your Bible. And folks, don't expect that you're going to fully understand the Bible in one reading. Or two. Or three. This is a book that you're going to read again and again, hopefully on a daily basis (at the very least on a weekly basis, you have to start somewhere). And I promise you that every time you read the book, you'll discover something new that applies to your life and touches your heart and soul. The Bible will tell you all that you need to know about God and the way in which He expects you to conduct your life when you choose to accept your place as a child of God.

Don't stop with trying to read the Bible on your own. Give the church a chance. God has placed the church there as a resource for you to come to know Him. He has placed teachers in the church to help you understand the Bible better. He has placed believers in the church to answer your questions about the Bible and to encourage you to continue to seek Jesus. And if you're going to a church that isn't helping you grow your faith or giving you encouragement in seeking Christ **GO TO ANOTHER CHURCH.** Seriously, you're not obliged to stay in a congregation if you aren't getting anything from it. Try another church, and another, and another until you find the one that **DOES** help you grow in faith.

PRAY TO THE SPIRIT. Prayer is our direct line of communication to God. When we pray, we open the door for God to send the Holy Spirit into our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our minds and hearts so that we understand the Bible better, but also so that we are receptive to its teachings. **NEVER** feel that God isn't listening to your prayers or that He doesn't care what you have to say. **I PROMISE** you that He hears you. There's a little danger that you can turn prayer into a stumbling block in your relationship with God. You shouldn't

approach prayer with the attitude that if God doesn't give me what I'm praying for then He doesn't love me or He doesn't exist at all. That's the enemy trying to trick you away from your faith. Remember that God is a good father...and being a good parent is knowing what's best for your child. What's best for your child is not giving them their way unconditionally but knowing when to say yes and when to say no to their requests. God has the big picture. He's got the road map for where He wants us to go. If He's not giving you everything you pray for, you can believe it's for a good reason.

If you don't see an immediate response, well...let me put it this way: You need to think of this whole relationship of knowing the Word, praying in the Spirit, and discerning what God and the Spirit teach you as a SKILL, just like playing a sport, crocheting, learning a new career, etc. It takes practice.

TALK TO OTHER BELIEVERS. It's fine to ask questions about God, Jesus, and the Bible with those who are further along in their faith. As I mentioned, that's what church is for.

WHEN YOU HAVE GOTTEN TO KNOW JESUS, IT'S TIME TO DECIDE FOR JESUS.

Okay, so you've read the Bible, prayed, and talked to other believers, and you feel the pull in your heart to pull the trigger on receiving Jesus as your Savior. You think that Christian living is something right for your life. You want to turn away from the things that you've come to recognize are harming or impeding your relationship with God. You want God to be your Father, Teacher, Savior, and Friend. GREAT! WONDERFUL! That's the time to get serious, and that's the point where BAPTISM becomes appropriate.

You shouldn't get baptized until you are aware that this is an act symbolizing a decision to reshape your life, heart, and attitudes around Christ's teachings. TO BE CLEAR—THE MINUTE YOU MAKE THE DECISION THAT JESUS IS YOUR SAVIOR IS THE MINUTE YOU ARE SAVED AND JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD. The act of baptism does not save you or justify you. Baptism is you declaring publicly that you desire to follow Jesus' ways and believe Jesus is your Savior.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Therein lies the difference between JUSTIFICATION and SANCTIFICATION. Once you have confessed a need for Jesus, repented of past sinful living, and received Jesus and been baptized in the name of God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit and opened your heart to allow all three to change how you live your life, that is when you are justified or declared righteous by God. Sanctification basically means that you have submitted your life to God's will and have been set apart so that your life can serve God's purposes. Sanctification is a process that will continue for the rest of our lives and the Holy Spirit works within us to grow us in grace and charity and make us more like Christ. That's kind of cool if you really think about it: You are a special part of God's plans now.

"Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).

"But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13)

NOW THAT YOU'VE DEDICATED YOUR LIFE TO BECOMING PART OF GOD'S PLANS...WELL, KEEP ON KEEPING ON.

Don't feel any different? Don't worry. We just learned that sanctification---being declared holy in God's eyes and living according to God's ways---is a lifelong process. Remember: Being a Christian is about having an eternal relationship with God. You're going to keep reading the Word, praying in the Spirit, and remaining a part of the Christian community where God has led you. What's different is that it's time to start applying the skills that you've been cultivating to your daily life: Family, friends, work, and public, these are all the venues where you have the chance to show the world how God is working on your heart. Again, God knows you aren't perfect. It's okay to make mistakes, and it's to be expected.

We're often eager at this point to please God by doing good works. Great! I would offer two guidelines for good works: 1) Make sure that whatever you want to do for God is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, who directs your steps. Pray on it, talk about it with other believers who are matured in the faith,

and consult the Scripture. 2) Check your motivation: Are you seeking to glorify God and only to glorify God? Everything we do as Christians should be with the motivation of giving glory to God before others, not bringing glory to ourselves. Scripture reminds us to walk humbly with God, submitting our ambitions to His purposes.

“Abide (remain) in Me (Jesus), and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in him bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples”. (John 15:4-8)

A word of warning: The harder you chase God and seek to glorify Him by good works like bringing others to the faith, the more the enemy is going to try to trip you up. He's going to send people and situations who will test you, challenge your faith, mock you, criticize you, tempt you...and I know that doesn't sound like fun and it won't be. Jesus tells us straight out that we'll have tribulation in this world, but to accept it with cheer. Jesus lived as a flesh and blood human. He knows what kind of pain this world can dish out. He persevered in His faith in God right up to His death on the cross. He overcame, and His Spirit will give believers the heart to overcome as well.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master’. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me”. (John 15:18-21)

Nobody comes to God or understands the Word of God UNLESS God has specifically called them, softening their hearts to seek Him. I hope that makes you feel special. You are here right now seeking to know God better because He wanted you, He chose you, He called you, and now that you are His nothing in this world or in the spiritual realm will take you away from God. He is jealous

and zealous for His children, loving you without measure and forgiving you again and again and again (seven times seventy times). He wants to comfort you through the pain that this world can inflict upon His children. He wants you to grow in confidence that He will be with you no matter what. He wants you to trust Him to guide you in this life and in His kingdom.

Therefore, don't be afraid to ask God the question: "WHY?" He expects it. Don't be afraid to lean on Him if you're discouraged. The Holy Spirit is also the Comforter; when you open your heart, He's going to bring you that comfort, that peace of knowing that Jesus is alongside you for whatever comes your way.

"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done" (Philippians 4:6)

A parent knows that children are going to have days of great joy, which will bring joy to the parent in turn. A parent also knows children are going to have days where they are rebellious, grieving, depressed, discouraged, and suffering. In those times, the parent's heart breaks for the child because he or she cannot prevent the world from causing pain. God knows that this world He created has become corrupted by sin, and that those sinful things of the world are eager to unleash hurt upon God's children. His heart breaks for our suffering, and He's preparing a time and place where those sufferings will end.

I'm tearing up as I write this, brothers and sisters, because I'm praying in the Spirit that you will not respond to these times with hate and anger towards God. Too often, I hear that God should make the world so that these sufferings don't happen because it's within His power to do so. I implore you to understand: Sometimes, God has to allow the things that cause us suffering as part of His greater purposes. Jesus took the cross knowing that God could have prevented it, could have sent angel armies to protect Him. Jesus understood how His suffering was going to be a part of God's greater plans for mankind. Please hold to the fact that God has the bigger picture and is working ALL things, including times of grief, pain, sorrow, and hurt, for our ultimate good. We are being forged in the fires of a sinful world so that we can be sharpened into tools that God can and will use defend the ultimate good God has planned.

MAKING DISCIPLES OF THE WORLD? ME?

It could be that the only person you will ever disciple is yourself. God will leave the 99 lost lambs to come after the 1...you. It could be that the only ones you disciple is a family member or a friend.

If that's the case, your discipleship will not have been in vain.

That being said, I don't think that God means for you to only make one or two disciples. People tend to think of discipling the world as going out on missionary trips, evangelizing unbelievers for God with magical and profound words that somehow instantly bring sinners to repentance. And sometimes for some people, that is in fact His plan and God gifts them with skills for that purpose.

I've mentioned that learning God's Word which is the Bible and seeking His guidance by praying in the Holy Spirit are essential parts of growing our relationship with God. Seeking His will for our lives is part of that continuing relationship. Walking every day in obedience to His will and growing in faith is part of the continuing process of sanctification. There is one more component of relationship with God that influences discipling others according to our commission: Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So I tell you that no one speaking by the help of the Holy Spirit can say that he hates Jesus. No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the help of the Holy Spirit. ⁴There are different kinds of gifts. But it is the same Holy Spirit Who gives them. ⁵There are different kinds of work to be done for Him. But the work is for the same Lord. ⁶There are different ways of doing His work. But it is the same God who uses all these ways in all people. ⁷The Holy Spirit works in each person in one way or another for the good of all. ⁸One person is given the gift of teaching words of wisdom. Another person is given the gift of teaching what he has learned and knows. These gifts are by the same Holy Spirit. ⁹One person receives the gift of faith. Another person receives the gifts of healing. These gifts are given by the same Holy Spirit. ¹⁰One person is given the gift of doing powerful works. Another person is given the gift of speaking God's Word. Another person is given the gift of telling the difference between the Holy Spirit and false spirits. Another person is given the gift of speaking in special sounds. Another person is given the gift of telling what these special sounds mean. ¹¹But it is the same Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, Who does all these things. He gives to each person as He wants to give. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

God gifts every believer with specific abilities that serve His purposes in growing His kingdom. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit and consulting with believers who are matured in the faith (trusted church pastors for example), we

can begin to discern what specific ability we have that can be used for God's purpose. Some are called to be evangelists, going out into the world to witness for Jesus and bring people to saving faith.

Some are missionaries and church planters, establishing new congregations around the world, sometimes in areas hostile to Christianity. Some are pastors and teachers who can help believers learn more about the Word and the will of God. Others are helpers, giving specific skills that can help the church (for tasks such as child care, music ministry, facilitating and assisting with church activities like food drives, driving people to church services, or praying on behalf of the church and its members). The Bible compares the church to a human body, with each believer being part of the body playing a vital role in keeping the church of Christ alive. EVERY BELIEVER AND HIS OR HER ROLE IN THE CHURCH IS VITAL AND SIGNIFICANT TO THE LORD.

¹² Our own body has many parts. When all these many parts are put together, they are only one body. The body of Christ is like this. ¹³ It is the same way with us. Jews or those who are not Jews, men who are owned by someone or men who are free to do what they want to do, have all been baptized into the one body by the same Holy Spirit. We have all received the one Spirit. ¹⁴ The body is not one part, but many parts. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that would not stop it from being a part of the body. ¹⁶ If the ear should say, "I am not a part of the body because I am not an eye," that would not stop it from being a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye how would it hear? If the whole body were an ear, how would it smell? ¹⁸ But God has put all the parts into the body just as He wants to have them. ¹⁹ If all the parts were the same, it could not be a body.

²⁰ But now there are many parts, but one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you." Or the head cannot say to the feet, "I do not need you." ²² Some of the parts we think are weak and not important are very important. ²³ We take good care of and cover with clothes the parts of the body that look less important. The parts which do not look beautiful have an important work to do. ²⁴ The parts that can be seen do not need as much care. God has made the body so more care is given to the parts that need it most. ²⁵ This is so the body will not be divided into parts. All the parts care for each other. ²⁶ If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. If one part is given special care, the other parts are happy. (1 Corinthians 12:12-26)

The missions of God's people in this world don't have to be big and life-altering to serve God's purposes. You don't have to wander far to find your missionary fields, and you don't have to be a powerful or gifted speaker to evangelize others. Everything that I've told you up until now are steps in

discipling others You see, when you have allowed God to change how you live your life and how you relate to other people in your life, you are already witnessing for Him. The daily practices of living in obedience to Christ's teachings are the things that begin to disciple others to come to God. If we're very lucky, other people see the profound change that comes from our faith—love, joy, peace of heart, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control are manifestation of God's Spirit within our hearts----and say "I want that for myself. What can I do to discover God in that way and let Him change me the way He's changed you?"

But beware: When we proclaim ourselves as Christians but lack that deep relationship with God, the accurate knowledge of His Word and the practice of applying it to all aspects of our lives, we can do harm to others. A person who calls himself or herself a Christian but displays attitudes contrary to Christ (hot temper, selfish behaviors, materialism, attitudes of judgement on others, infidelity, placing unreasonable demands on other believers, adding requirements for church membership that are not rooted in Scripture, etc.) project the image of a church of hypocrites and can actually drive people away from saving faith. No true believer of Christ would ever want to be the reason another person stumbles in his or her walk with the Lord.

At its heart, that's what discipling others for God is all about. It begins when you first seek God. It continues when you forge a continuing relationship with God by following the teachings and ways of Christ. The more you trust God to lead the way, the more God is able to use you for the good of people around you to bring them into a saving relationship with Him.

Stay strong in the faith, knowing that you are loved, wanted, and important to the Lord!

Happy Easter, brothers and sisters!

He is RISEN indeed!