

Lesson 11: Purposes of the Church – Discipleship

Opening:

In the study *Basics* published by LifeWay, Robby Gallaty notes “Discipleship is not a class you take. It is the course of one’s life.” Discipleship is not just a study we engage in, or a class we participate in, nor even just a personal Bible study that we do. While all those things are important pieces of discipleship, the core of discipleship is a willingness to follow Jesus into spiritual maturity. In this lesson, we will be looking at the three stages of spiritual maturity.

Read the following passages and write down what the Bible says about spiritual maturity:

1 Peter 2:1-3 _____

Colossians 1:24-29 _____

Ephesians 4:15-16 _____

Central Truths:

- God infuses the local church with His Spirit for the purpose of building mature believers who effectively live as Christ lived.
- One of the key principles of parenthood is that we are training up our children to release them to fulfill God’s mission for their lives.
- As we grow into spiritual maturity we understand that God created us for a purpose. We begin to be excited about what God is doing around us and in the lives of others, not just in our own lives.
- Spiritual parents serve in the ministries of the church and build relationships with others outside the church. They serve as spiritual mentors. They build into others. While they are not perfect, they exhibit the fruit of the spirit in their relationships.

Purposes of the Church – Discipleship:

In the very first lesson in this series, we talked about discipleship. We noted two important truths: 1.) The reason for discipleship is to bring glory to God; 2.) Discipleship is taking what we learn about God and intentionally putting it into practice during the week.

God wants us to grow as disciples into maturity (what we call sanctification). One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to guide us into maturity (See 2 Corinthians 3:18). We cannot do that on our own (See Zechariah 4:6). Growing in Christ requires the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us continually toward maturity.

Spiritual maturity is also the responsibility of the believer. God allows us to choose how we will respond to His love for us. (Read Romans 6:12-14) In Romans 6:12-14 we see that God desires that we present our whole self to Him so that He can transform us.

Spiritual maturity occurs through the local church. We mature as we study the word together in community (see Acts 2:42-47). We mature as we use our gifts to meet the needs of others in the church (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Every believer needs the local church. Members need other believers who are called to be part of the same body. Being part of a church can be difficult at times because everyone is a sinner, but God has not given up on the local church and devised another plan. **He infuses the local church with His Spirit for the purpose of building mature believers who effectively live as Christ lived.**

Examining the Text:

Reading the Biblical Text: 1 John 2:12-17

¹² I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

¹³ I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

¹⁴ I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Many people believe that spiritual maturity is primarily about knowing the Bible. While knowing God's word is important to our spiritual maturity, knowledge does not equal spiritual maturity. In 1 John 2:12-17, John addresses people in three distinct stages of spiritual maturity by referring to them as moving from: the world to children, from children to young adults, and from young adults to parents.

The first stage of spiritual maturity is moving from spiritual death to life in Christ. Look at V. 12 *I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.*

Ephesians 2:1-10 addresses this stage. Paul notes in this passage that we come to recognize our deadness apart from Christ and the richness of His mercy toward us.

Look ahead to VV. 15-16 *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*

These two verses address us in our deadness and warn believers not to allow these things to keep us from growing to maturity. The temptations of the world appeals to our desires for quick fixes and immediate results, to our impatience – these are the desires of the flesh. The world targets our affections (eyes), and it calls us to pursue our own ambitions and glorify our achievements above all else (the pride of life). When John talks about the world, he is talking about the perspective of the world, or the worldview that excludes God. The world itself is neutral. It is a thing to be enjoyed that God has made.

When a person comes to know Christ as Savior, someone has shared the gospel and the new believer has accepted God's grace and forgiveness. If we are not

careful, we can become spiritually stagnant. **One of the key principles of parenthood is that we are training up our children to release them to fulfill God's mission for their lives.** It is God's desire for us to grow into spiritual maturity, but it is possible to remain in the infant/child stage in our spiritual growth.

The key marker of the infant/childhood stage of maturity is self-centeredness. While this is not a bad thing to want to focus on one's self, it is not God's desire that we remain in this stage.

Jim Putman in his book *Discipleshift* notes several things that people might communicate if they fail to move forward from this stage of maturity:

- "I don't know if this church is meeting my needs anymore. Maybe I should go to a different church that does better."
- "I don't like the music today, they should play (you fill in the blank here)."
- "No one ever says 'hi' to me." "I would join the choir, but no one asked me." "I was helping in preschool but no one told me they appreciated me so I quit."
- "My small group is not taking care of my needs."

Spiritual childhood is characterized by an enthusiasm to learn new truth about God, an excitement about sharing our faith with others, and a transition from old habits to new habits.

The second stage of spiritual maturity is moving from spiritual childhood to spiritual young adulthood.

Look at what John notes about "young men" in VV. 13 and 14. *I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. 14 I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

In this stage of spiritual maturity "overcome the evil one" is a key phrase. It notes a shift from being self-centered to God-centered and others-centered. Thom Rainer explains it this way: "It is when Christ transforms our character in such a way that selfishness takes a back seat to service, and that service is celebrated

together. We set aside the things of the world that are tempting but passing in order to take up God's transformation in us that is lasting."

Notice that at this stage we trust in and rely on "the word of God." At this stage of spiritual maturity, we are feeding ourselves spiritually (or more accurately we are allowing the Holy Spirit to feed us). The Sunday sermon becomes a supplement to our spiritual growth rather than the only source of our growth. We still need others in our lives, but we learn to focus less on us and more on the kingdom of God. We are learning what ministry looks like by serving in the church, seeing the people around us as people in need of the transformational love of Christ, and **we begin to understand that God created us for a purpose. We begin to be excited about what God is doing around us and in the lives of others, not just in our own lives.**

The third stage of spiritual maturity is moving from spiritual young adulthood to being a spiritual parent.

Look at the words that John addresses to fathers in Verses 13 and 14. *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. 14 I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.*

John uses the phrase "you know Him." Spiritual parents trust in and lean on Jesus so they can reflect Him to others. In this stage, spiritually mature people are invested in making disciples of others. They are seeking out and walking in intentional relationships with others who need to know Christ and those who need to grow in Him. People are drawn to these believers because they know Christ. Spiritual parents are centered on the kingdom of God and dependent on God for their strength. **Spiritual parents serve in the ministries of the church and build relationships with others outside the church. They serve as spiritual mentors. They build into others. While they are not perfect, they exhibit the fruit of the spirit in their relationships.** (See Galatians 5:22-23).

Applying the Text:

After we accept Christ, it is possible to be at different stages of maturity in different areas of our lives. Think about areas where you need to become more mature in your faith. Remember that this is not something we do on our own, it

is something that we do as we learn to follow Jesus by submitting to the Holy Spirit's leadership in our lives.

Below are some questions to help you as a group and as individuals grow in maturity:

- How are we growing on purpose into Christlikeness in this season of our lives? If we do not feel like we are growing, what could God be revealing to us that we need to mature in?
- Do we have mentors in our life right now? Who are we intentionally mentoring? Who could God be leading us to mentor? What are we teaching those who are watching us about what it means to grow mature in Christ? Is what we are teaching consistent with Jesus' commandments (love God and love one another)?