

## Introduction

I grew up in a pagan home. When I was four or five, my mother married a man who was a wizard—not a witch and not a warlock. A wizard. I don’t know what that means, but it doesn’t mean either Harry Potter or Gandalf. He was only in our lives for a couple years but my mother continued to use Ouija boards and Tarot cards. She may have before she married him; I remember them after. This was the closest thing to religion in our household. There was no mention of God unless it were in cursing.

Then one day my sister met a man from a little Baptist church just a few miles from our home. She began attending regularly and wouldn’t stop pestering me to also attend, so to get her to stop, I visited. And kept going. I didn’t understand all the rules and such, but these people were different from all the people I had known. Even more, this Jesus was utterly unlike anyone I had ever encountered.

It took a while but I discovered they also met Sunday nights. The church bus didn’t run Sunday nights so I walked the three miles or so to get there. Then I found out about the Wednesday night service! No wonder I was so skinny as a kid!

I remember approaching the pastor one day to ask how I could grow as a Christian. I certainly didn’t have any of the lingo yet. I didn’t ask for a theology of sanctification or anything of the sort. I didn’t even know I was asking “to be discipled”. I just knew I wasn’t a very good Christian yet and I wanted to be, so I asked him for help. He went into his office and came out with a book called “Milk”. It was a self-study book about how to become a Christian, about prayer, about baptism, and the church. I finished it that week and gave it to him on Sunday—with all the answers filled in.

He went into his office again and came out with another book: he gave me “Meat”. This book dealt with such doctrines as the inspiration of Scripture, the Trinity, man, Satan, and the second coming. I finished it before the following Sunday. The third book was called “Bread” and dealt with the virgin birth and the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. The following Sunday he gave me “Fish”, dealing with sin and its penalty, Christ’s death for sin in more detail, and trusting Christ as Savior. This book, appropriately, also encouraged evangelism—we were, after all, *fishers of men*.

I was given four books and finished them in four weeks. When I turned in “Fish” I asked what was next. He said there were no more books. What? No “Dairy”? “Vegetables”? “Fruit”? That one seems like it would be a really good title for a book like these. But, no. There were no more books. I stood there outside his office in utter shock that my “discipleship” was finished. I had arrived. It was now my responsibility to take this newfound spiritual maturity and go multiply fish.

Keep in mind this was the only up-close experience I had with Christianity. This was, as far as I could see, the entirety of the Christian life. I heard about all the rules, of course. Hair length was especially important for guys. No drums in music. No alcohol. No playing cards—well, *Skip-Bo* and *Uno* were allowed. You could watch movies—but not at the movie

theater. You had to wait until it came out on video cassette and watch it like the apostles did. *At home.*

But as a teenager standing there, having turned in my fourth and last book on “discipleship”, I wondered what I was supposed to do. The rules were the rules and if I tried really hard I could keep those, but I was still filled with lust and couldn’t seem to get control of it. I was still prone to fits of anger and was getting in fights all the time. None of these books alleviated that in any way. Oh, I *knew* a whole lot more than when I started! These were books for studying doctrine! *I had been disciplined!* I was still a teenager, though, with little in the way love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and certainly very little self-control. *But I had been disciplined.*

I suspect I am not alone in my experience. How many of us have actually been *discipled*? Let’s back up a step. What *is* discipleship? We cannot answer the first question without knowing what discipleship is in the first place. In this five-week series on discipleship, I aim to answer the question of what discipleship is, and then to show us how we go about actually making disciples.

You’re not likely to hear a lot of new stuff in this series—at least not new from me. If you’ve been around New City for some time what will really take place is I aim to pull together a number of threads, concepts we already know, but put together in a way that shows us what our mission statement means: “Making disciples. *Period.*” To get there, let’s start with that classic text on discipleship, the one in Mark 10.

Mark  
10:17–22

Mk 10:17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” <sup>20</sup> And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” <sup>21</sup> And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Mark 10:17–22

## Resetting Parameters

Mark says Jesus was setting out on a journey when “a man” ran up to him. When Matthew tells the same story he calls him “the young man”. Luke also shares this story and calls him “a ruler”. All three Gospel writers point out he is rich so we have the story of “the rich young ruler”. But what sort of ruler is he? Luke writes of various rulers in his Gospel, and all are negative. They are the leadership opposed to the Lord Jesus.

It’s unlikely he’s a member of the Sanhedrin, for he is probably too young for that. He doesn’t seem to be a Roman official or that would have been pointed out. Being rich and therefore influential, he was a leader among his people, despite being young.

Notice Mark says he ran up to Jesus. There is an urgency in him. As Jesus was gaining notoriety as a teacher and a miracle worker, he wanted to know something. He ran up to him

and knelt before him, showing respect, and asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Notice two things. First, he's asking what he must *do*, as if eternal life is something one *accomplishes*.

The second thing is he asks how to *inherit*, which implies a recognition that eternal life is also a gift. You inherit by being the child or grandchild of someone. That's not something *you* did. You didn't choose to be born to your parents, so when you inherit something from them, it isn't an accomplishment for you. It is a gift you have received. This man seems to believe he will be able to earn such a gift.

His understanding is quite skewed from the get-go. Still, given his sense of urgency and given he kneels before Jesus and given he calls him "Good Teacher", he's earnest. He genuinely wants to receive eternal life and presents as one willing to do anything for it.

As do both Matthew and Luke, Mark includes Jesus' immediate response to the man's question but offers no explanation. The man called him "Good Teacher" and Jesus asks in response, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." What in the world? Why is this his immediate response? Jesus is resetting the parameters of the conversation!

The man wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus points out the standard isn't what the man can do, but the reality that God is good. God is the moral standard. God is the one by which he is to measure himself—not a list of rules he might follow. By pointing out only God is good, Jesus reframes the conversation completely. Then he turns to something the man was familiar with in order to drive home the point only God is good.

He tells him he knows the commandments, and he lists some of them. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. These are the "second tablet" commandments. The first four commandments deal with humans relating directly to God. The latter six deal with humans relating to one another. It was believed by many in the ancient world the first four were on one tablet with the other six on the other tablet.

Notice one change, however. Jesus includes "Do not defraud". He lists this where "Do not covet" should be. Fraud is one result of coveting. By saying, "Do not defraud", he's making what would otherwise be an internal problem visible. You cannot look at someone and see coveting in his or her heart. You can see a person defrauding another. Jesus very intentionally, then, lists commands that are able to be seen. Keep in mind the reframing that he's already provided: only God is good.

At this the young man breathes a sigh of relief, for he has kept these rules of conduct! He hasn't murdered. He hasn't committed adultery. He hasn't stolen. He hasn't born false witness. He hasn't defrauded. He has honored his parents. From his *youth* he has kept these rules! There's no indication that he's lying.

Mark says Jesus looked at him. The idea is he *searched* him. He could see right through the man. Mark then adds Jesus, having thoroughly looked at the man, *loved* him. What does his love compel him to do? Congratulate him for keeping the rules? Applaud him for inheriting eternal life? No, loving him meant Jesus pointed out the commandment he had, in fact, failed to keep. The law requires him to sell all that he has and to give to the poor.

Where does the law require this, though? *Everywhere*. As Jesus has already pointed out, only God is good. And goodness is standing before this rich young ruler, but the young man cannot see Jesus.

## The Law

We've seen numerous times over the years that Torah—the Teaching—came to be misunderstood during the exile. After Babylon defeated Judah and took countless Jews out of Israel and into exile, how they understood the Torah was radically changed. When it was given, it was understood to be God's self-revelation. Murder wasn't wrong because the commandment says, "Do not murder". The commandment says "Do not murder" because God is the sort who would never take life unjustly.

Mark says the man "went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions". When Jesus told him the law requires him to sell his possessions, what he heard was too great a price to pay for eternal life. His riches were worth more than eternal life. In his "Large Catechism" Martin Luther wrote,

Large  
Cate-  
chism  
quote

A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol.

If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your god.

Large Catechism, First Commandment, paragraphs 13–15

Where was this man's trust? He went away sorrowful, for Jesus—the very embodiment of all that is good and right—had just told him to sell his great possessions and give the money to the poor. The very things in which this man took refuge and set his heart on was his great possessions. Oh, he had kept the rules! Well, except for the first one. He broke the first commandment, and repeatedly. No, he didn't bow down before a physical idol or carved image. He was far too sophisticated and "faithful" for that. Instead, his heart bowed before his possessions. Luther also said,

Large  
Cate-  
chism  
quote

All commandments are summed up in the First Commandment and have to do with it.

Large Catechism, Paragraph 329

You cannot steal without first having an idol before the Lord. You cannot commit adultery without first bowing your heart before a very different sort of god. You cannot murder or dishonor your parents or defraud your neighbor unless someone or some thing has your ultimate loyalty in place of the Lord, even if only for a moment. To break commandments 2–10 is to also break the first commandment.

When we sin against God, we are first and foremost bowing before an idol, whether the idol of pleasure or security or status or power or control. To sin against God is to acknowledge in our hearts and then in our behavior that someone or some thing in our life is more important to us than God.

Conversely, it is entirely possible to break the first commandment while also seeming to keep the others. From this man's youth he had not murdered, committed adultery, stolen,

born false witness, or defrauded. From his youth he had honored his parents. He lacked one thing, however, and this one thing was the point of the law all along: he wasn't like God.

## The True Rich Young Ruler

He kept the rules! He followed the Torah—the Ten Commandments—as *a code of conduct*, but he did so in a way that he was not actually like the Lord. He did them out of duty and obligation, and this was not what it means to keep his commandments. Consider Leviticus 19. Moses is giving a series of commandments on a wide variety of topics.

Lev 19:1 And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I YHWH your God am holy.

Leviticus 19:1–2

Here we see the very basis for the law of Moses: Israel must be holy for YHWH their God is holy. He continues.

Lev 19:3 Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am YHWH your God. <sup>4</sup> Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am YHWH your God.

Leviticus 19:3–4

Oh, got it. This is YHWH your God speaking. Can't forget that. So keep the Sabbaths and don't turn to idols because YHWH is God. Got it.

Lev 19:9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup> And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am YHWH your God.

Leviticus 19:9–10

Israel was commanded to provide for the poor by not harvesting every last scrap from their fields and from their vineyards and orchards. Got it. And yes, we know who is speaking. Yes, it's *YHWH God of Israel*. We get it.

Lev 19:11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. <sup>12</sup> You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am YHWH.

Leviticus 19:11–12

Yes. We get it. We know who is speaking. It's YHWH. We get it. Why does he keep identifying himself? Israel must be holy because YHWH is holy! How do we know? Look at his commandments! That is, Israel was not being given a list of rules by which to inherit eternal life. Israel was to be like YHWH, the God of Israel. What is he like? He's holy, and

holiness looks like keeping his Sabbaths and not murdering and not bowing down to idols and caring for the poor.

Israel was to be like God and to be like God requires keeping his commandments, but keeping his commandments could be done without being like him! How do we know this? How do we know it's possible to keep the commandments without actually being like the Lord, which is the point of the commandments in the first place? Jesus looked at the young man and loved him and told him he lacked one thing the law required: he must sell everything he has and give the money to the poor, for this is what the law required.

Remember how Jesus reframed the man's urgent question. Only God is good. When asking about inheriting eternal life, you have to start here: only God is good. And what is God like? God is the sort who would sell everything he had in order to give the money to the poor. We know this because the apostle Paul tells this is so.

When he was raising funds for the mother church in Jerusalem, he urged the Corinthians to be generous, but did not command them to be generous. He could have! As an apostle, he had authority to bind the consciences of God's people. He told Philemon he could command him to free his slave, which was a legal matter governed by the laws of the Roman empire and Paul was no Roman official. He told him that rather than command him, he wanted Philemon to choose what is right. He said he could have commanded generosity of the Corinthians. Instead, Paul pointed them to Jesus:

2 Cor 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.  
2 Corinthians 8:9

You see, Jesus *is* the rich young ruler who sold everything in order to give to the poor. When he tells the man to sell everything he has and give to the poor, he's simply telling him to do what the law required. The law of Moses was not a list of rules but a description of what God is like given in the form of commandments. God is the sort who would give away everything for the good of others. Jesus was simply telling the rich young man to be *like him*. The man went away sorrowful, for he wanted to *act like* Jesus, without actually *being like* Jesus.

## The Call to Discipleship

We can control our behavior, but we cannot control our hearts. This is why the advice that is often given is terrible advice. *Do not* follow your heart! Your heart is deceptive. It wants what it wants and we are powerless to change it. We can, however, control our behavior—especially when the idols we make compel us to. We will pursue our idols with complete and utter abandon. How many times have we seen marriages destroyed because a person pursued some sort of fantasy idol that offered greater pleasure, greater joy, greater excitement? How many times have we seen corrupt politicians who would do anything for the idol of more votes and continued power in office? I'm reminded of John Calvin's observation:

John Calvin quote      Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.  
John Calvin

What is the solution, then? It isn't a list of rules. The rich young ruler had a list of rules that he kept quite well. He obeyed the letter of the law yet failed utterly to do what the law actually required. It isn't a series of four books you read and work through. My own life shows that. It isn't even a life of extreme self-denial, as if figuring out a way to avoid sin at all costs is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The problem with the typical approaches to discipleship is how me-focused they are. They're about *me*, about what *I* do. At its core, what is discipleship? Peter Maiden explains it well.

Peter  
Maiden  
quote

Jesus' call to discipleship is not an invitation to participate in a programme or even to share in a cause but to be with a Person, so that he can make us into the people he wants us to be. The call to discipleship is the call to relationship, a relationship that will gradually make us all that God intended us to be.  
Peter Maiden, "Discipleship"

From the very beginning God has been calling humans into a relationship with him. This is the very reason he created Adam and Eve! It is quite interesting to me that in Genesis 3 Moses seems to casually mention that the Lord God was walking in the garden and called out to them. "Hey, where are you? You ready for our evening walk?" Why? Why was God walking in the garden? God created Adam and Eve that he might know them and they might know him. That is, God created them for a relationship with him!

Smarty  
Word

If discipleship is the call to be with a Person, then making disciples is anything we do that causes us to enter into a deeper relationship with that Person, with God himself. This is why discipleship is not a program. We tend to substitute knowledge of facts for knowledge of a Person. We act as though knowing more *about* the Lord is the same as knowing *the Lord*.

Real, genuine discipleship is not merely an ethical change or following a list of rules. If it were, Jesus would have welcomed the rich young ruler as a citizen of his kingdom. He would have said, "Well done, young man!" He didn't. This is because merely following the rules is not what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship includes obeying the Lord, but mere outward obedience is what the young man *had*, and Jesus said it wasn't enough!

The law of God—God's self-revelation through commandments—called the young man to be holy for God is holy. He was called to be generous for God is generous. He was called to live a life for the good of others, for God is like this. When God first created humans we're told he created them—*us*—in his image. That is, humans were created to represent God. This is the aim of discipleship. To represent God requires we be like him, which is why the law given to Moses says, "Be holy, for I am holy". That is, the aim of discipleship is a relationship with God in Trinity through the Son, with the outcome being our transformation so that we become like Jesus. This is the ordinary Christian life! Again Peter Maiden is helpful.

Peter  
Maiden  
quote

...the life of discipleship is not the special life. It is not the *extraordinary* Christian life; it is the *ordinary* Christian life. It is the life every Christian should be living. It is life as God intended it to be; a life lost by our sin but with the possibility of its restoration, bought at great cost.  
Peter Maiden, "Discipleship"

That restoration of life comes through faith in the Lord Jesus as God through his Spirit works to transform us. It is the real and genuine transformation from within that results in true discipleship, for becoming like Jesus necessarily begins inside and works itself out. You cannot become more like Jesus from the outside in, for as we've seen, the heart is a perpetual factory of idols. If you try to become more like Jesus from the outside in, then your very behavior modification, your avoidance of sin, your strict adherence to rules becomes a replacement idol for the idols of sinful pleasures.

Rather than bowing before the idols of money or sex or power or popularity, we begin to bow before the idols of self-righteousness and rule-keeping. An idol will compel us to do anything in our power to satisfy that idol's demands, even if that idol demands extreme rules-keeping. It is so easy to conflate keeping rules with being like Jesus. Central to discipleship is the heart-change necessary for behavioral changes that truly honor the Lord. When the heart is changed, the inevitable outcome is a life that begins to look more and more like Jesus.

## Application

The shift that needs to take place in our thinking is this: salvation is not a destination; it is a Person. God calls us to himself in faith and repentance, and puts his Spirit within us, that the Spirit of God might bring about that change in our hearts that will result in a change in our outward behavior. That change is an ever-increasing desire for the Lord. This means we become like Jesus from the inside out. Starting with our behavior and somehow hoping it ends up changing our hearts doesn't work, for our idols can change our behavior.

This is why discipleship is not sin management or behavior modification. Discipleship is the process of real, true transformation. Real discipleship, the kind the Lord desires for each one of us, comes from a changed heart, and only the Lord himself can change our hearts. This is discipleship. It is not part of the Christian life: it *is* the Christian life.

Everything we do that makes us more like Jesus is discipleship. Anything that draws us closer to the Lord and causes our hearts to incline toward him is discipleship. Anything, then, that draws our heart away from the Lord is not merely *not discipleship*, but is actively opposed to the Lord and his purposes. Let me say it more strongly: anything that draws our hearts away from the Lord Jesus is the spirit of antichrist.

Not every TV show you watch makes you more like Jesus. Not every album you listen to—even if it's "Christian" music—makes you more like Jesus. Not every activity you engage in makes you more like Jesus. Not every thing that you spend your money on makes you more like Jesus. You can buy groceries in a way that makes you more like Jesus. If you express gratitude at the ability to shop and if you experience thanksgiving to the Lord for being able to buy groceries, then buying groceries becomes an act of discipleship. Refusing to be thankful for groceries makes the ordinary act of buying the necessities for life a thing that is contrary to God's purposes for you.

This is why Paul could tell the Corinthians, whether you eat or drink, *or whatever you do*, do all to the glory of God. Everything you and I do should be done for the glory of God, which means everything we do should draw us ever closer to him. Anything that does not draw us closer must be evaluated, for that thing is opposed to God's purpose for our lives.



God's self-revelation shows us how to live. The Lord calls us to be like him, to be transformed in our inner being, that our desires become his desires and our lives reflect his nature. This is where discipleship begins. It begins by entering into a relationship with the Lord through faith in Jesus and through that relationship we are transformed by his Spirit so that we become like him.

If a new believer came to me and asked how he or she could grow in faith and in Christ-likeness, my first response would not be to give him or her a book. Hear me: books are good. Knowledge is important. Knowledge of the Lord Jesus is greater than knowledge of a book, however. My first response would be to urge the new believer to participate in the life of the church. This is because *discipleship happens in relationship*—first with God and also with others. You cannot be a true disciple of Jesus all by yourself. It begins by entering into a relationship with the Lord, and therefore with his people.

To be like Jesus is to live a life for the good of others. This is why participation in the life of the church is important. As we'll see later in this series, God has gifted the church with gifted men and women, and if you are in Christ that group includes you. Being like him means we will serve others. Think of this: when Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest, what did he say?

Matthew  
26:36–40

Mt 22:36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 22:36–40

The rich young ruler did not love the Lord with all his heart and soul and mind, nor did he love his neighbor. This is why the man refused to be a disciple of Jesus. He could not see Jesus. I love how Paul describes coming to salvation in 2 Corinthians 4. It is one of my favorite passages of Scripture. He said the same God who once declared, “Let there be light”, “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”.

When you see the face of true beauty, there is nothing you won't do to pursue him. When you see Jesus for who he is and for what he has done, there is no price too high to walk with him. You will take up your cross daily to be his disciple. You will sell everything you have to give to the poor. You will live your life for the good of others. You will be just like Jesus. This is discipleship.