

Session One: Disciples Growing Together

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[0 : 00] Hello, and welcome back to Gospel Growth.

My name is Brian Hart, and we're starting a new module. We began Gospel Growth, this curriculum, by talking about the importance of getting the gospel, and then we talked about gathering around the gospel.

And we're going to now transition into thinking about what it means to grow up into the gospel. And this has to do with maturity, and really a word for that is discipleship, which is this process of becoming more and more like Jesus as his followers and as his disciples.

There is a great example of what discipleship looks like in the Bible, and it's a relationship between the Apostle Paul and a friend of his, a young man named Timothy.

And in their relationship, we see a powerful example of the fact that disciples grow together. This is not something that we just do on our own. We need other people to help us.

[1 : 06] And so we're going to look at some discipleship lessons that come from 2 Timothy, which is the last letter that Paul wrote right before he died, actually. And we're going to consider what is discipleship, and how does it work, and what is required.

Now, many of you will know that Paul wrote a huge amount of the New Testament, very dynamic leader, had a huge ministry, planted dozens of churches, and strengthened many churches throughout his travels.

But here he is at the end of his life, and he's writing to one person, investing in one person. And it's not a theological treatise. It's not a pamphlet on church planning.

He is writing to encourage and help a young man named Timothy, who was like a son in the faith to Paul, a disciple. And if anybody could have been excused from this kind of interpersonal relationship, and the focus on investing into a single person, I mean, surely it would have been Paul.

Huge amounts of responsibility, huge impact. You just think about the number of people that would have heard Paul, and yet he still prioritizes finding somebody else to pour into and raise up and to multiply himself into.

[2 : 25] And so as we talk about how we grow in discipling relationships, we want to hold attention between two things. On the one hand, we need each other to grow. We can't do this on our own.

But on the other hand, we also have to take ownership of our own journey, of our own walk with the Lord. No one is ultimately going to do this for us.

And so we're going to consider that tension a little bit in this next session. So first of all, we need each other. This is clear. It's clear all throughout the New Testament, not just in Paul's relationship with Timothy.

But we're going to look at how Paul and Timothy interact and how Paul interacts specifically with Timothy. So he says this at the beginning of the letter. He says, That's a beautiful thing to say.

I mean, why don't you just think about receiving a letter from someone and having them say that about you? I'm hoping that for many of you watching this, there are actually people that come to mind that might say this about you.

[3 : 53] People who would love you like this, who pray for you and care for you. And I'm hoping that you maybe can think of others who you might say this about.

People who you care about and you are with them in their hard moments and you have done life with them. And yeah, you pray for them and care about them. These are precious verses. But if there aren't people that come to mind for us, if we can't say that there are people who we're in relationship with like that, who care for us and pray for us and remember us before the Lord.

And in the same way, there's nobody else that we're doing that for either. These verses are a little bit haunting. It will highlight a loss that we're actually not getting the benefit of this kind of relationship that Paul and Timothy had.

So that's a question we're thinking about. Is there anybody else that we have a relationship with that looks like this? Mature Christians are called to come alongside one another as spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers.

And less mature Christians need the more mature Christians to invest into them. In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul says this to the Corinthian church.

[5 : 05] He says, For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Paul spent a lot of time in Corinth.

This was not a letter just written to a group of people. Paul did some of that. Paul wrote letters to people that he had never even met before. But in Corinth, he had spent a lot of time with these guys. And he said, You have many guides, but I was like a father to you.

Man, we have so many guides today. We have books. We have TV shows. We have podcasts, articles online. There are a lot of people who will give you their opinion.

Frankly, even what I'm doing right now. I mean, this whole series, this is in some sense a guide. But what Paul is saying is people need more than guides, and you need more even than a video.

You and I, we need people in our life who are like older brothers and sisters. We're like fathers and mothers. People whose lives we can actually imitate. Who we see.

[6 : 02] How do they live? So we know how we should live. Now, we need that, but we often don't reach for it. We don't proactively look for it, and maybe we even cut ourselves off from it.

And the reason for that is that it's hard. It takes time to have relationships like this. It's costly. And you will make yourself vulnerable to people, and they will inevitably let you down.

There is a lie that a lot of us think that we just really don't need those kind of relationships to grow. It's just everything is just between me and Jesus. That is just not what the Bible says.

It's very easy to be on an island all by yourself, drifting in and out of the church. And, you know, we talked about this in this, you know, the gathering around, the gathering of the church, the gathering around the gospel. We talked already about the importance of community, but here what we're trying to highlight is that actually it's really impossible to grow without that.

It's a huge part of how we grow is in community. So we have to grow with others. And then as we grow and understand someone else's discipleship, we're actually meant to turn around and share what we've learned.

[7 : 07] So Paul says this in 2 Timothy 2. He says, You then, my child, speaking to Timothy, be strengthened by the grace that's in Christ Jesus. And what you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

One of our primary hopes for everyone who's part of our church is that they will eventually grow to the point where they're able, willing, and desiring to take the next step of multiplying themselves into others.

A lot of us don't make it to that step. A lot of us, some of us even have a really maybe even healthy understanding of the idea that we are meant to grow.

We're meant to be perpetual, lifelong learners. We want to be disciples, but we don't take the next step of becoming a discipler. Spiritual sons and daughters are meant to grow into spiritual fathers and mothers.

And if that does not happen, something has probably gone wrong. The author of Hebrews dealt with this. He said this in Hebrews 5. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

[8 : 18] You need milk, not solid food. So it's not a good thing when disciples remain a student and follower and never step into the position of sharing with someone else and discipling someone else and teaching someone else.

That would be like a child that grows up and is never weaned off his or her mother's breast milk. Years ago, some of you will remember this, Time Magazine ran a very controversial issue.

And the cover was a child breastfeeding, but it wasn't like a baby. It was like a boy who was like over five years old. He's standing up, still drinking his mother's breast milk.

And the reason that was controversial is because most of us know, almost all of us know, at some point that is supposed to stop. At some point you grow up and you don't drink breast milk anymore.

You are meant to mature. And so it's the same with us. We have got to move on from being infants in Christ to growing up. And so we're actually the ones able to provide for other infants in Christ. [9 : 21] Now, something I want to point out about Paul's mentorship of Timothy is that he didn't coddle him. Timothy wasn't codependent with Paul. Paul was actually pushing Timothy, cheering him on, encouraging him to stand on his own two feet.

Because after all, if you are not going to take ownership of your walk with the Lord, no one else can take ownership of it for you. Like I said, we see in this, in 2 Timothy, we see both a call to real relational investment, but also real intentionality.

The beginning of chapter 2, Paul uses some very intense metaphors to communicate the demand of discipleship that every follower of Jesus needs to embrace. Everyone is meant to submit to intentional, demanding discipleship.

He says this in 2 Timothy 2, to Timothy, See, We also need to intentionally pursue our own growth and development.

And that's where these metaphors are very helpful. Each of them suggests something. The first one is of a soldier who's unencumbered by civilian pursuits, fully devoted to his mission.

[10 : 56] Discipleship requires personal devotion. In Paul's day, soldiers could not have side gigs or civilian pursuits.

They were expected to be single-mindedly focused on their task and ultimately on what Caesar wanted of them. They were meant to have competing allegiances and other work priorities.

So Paul's telling Timothy, Following Jesus isn't something that you just fit in like it's a side hustle. It's not just sort of one aspect of your life. It takes over everything. To be a good soldier means you're going to have to invest in this.

And so if we're treating following Jesus like it's just one of the things rather than the main thing, man, we're setting ourselves up for failure, really. I spent eight months in Afghanistan as a Marine. And while I was there, you know, there was rest time certainly, but every moment of my day, waking and sleeping, every moment was designed for the mission.

[12 : 00] That's a great way of thinking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. One day the deployment, so to speak, will end. Jesus will return. We have a bright future, an eternal future with him.

For right now, though, there is a mission. And as soldiers, we've been called into this and we're expected to be devoted to it. That means like a good soldier, there may be things that we have to cut out of our lives.

And those may even be good things. But anything that stands in the way of the mission of being devoted to Jesus and his kingdom is going to have to go. This is a demanding bar that Paul is setting for Timothy.

Nobody can put Jesus first for you. You have to do that yourself. The next example that Paul gives is of an athlete training for gold. Discipleship requires discipline. Paul is telling Timothy that if he's going to endure as a Christian, he needs as much discipline and self-control as an Olympic athlete. And think about the training that those guys go through. Timothy can't just indulge in every whim and every passion. He's got to actually restrain himself to develop the conditioning that he needs to reach the end of his race.

[13 : 08] So if we don't expect athletes to become great without practice, training, exercise, do we think that we're going to grow in discipleship and holiness without practice and training and disciplines?

I mean, disciple and discipline are related words. Disciples are meant to follow in the disciplines, the ways of their master. That's what discipleship is all about. There's a pastor named Eugene Peterson who wrote a book about living as a Christian.

And the title of the book, a lot of people have made a big deal about the title of the book because it really sums up discipleship so well. It's called A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. That's what discipleship is.

It's a long journey of obedience in the same direction. It's not always exciting. It's not always glamorous. It starts off kind of novel and thrilling, but over a while it can sometimes feel mundane. It can feel like an athlete doing the same thing every day. Paul is calling Timothy to walk this long road of obedience in the same direction. And it's tough, but it's worth it. There is a reward.

[14:12] For the athlete, it's the gold medal. For the farmer, it's the harvest. And that's the third picture that Paul uses here with Timothy. He talks about being like a farmer working towards the harvest.

The farmer puts a ton of work into his farm. Blood, sweat, probably even tears. Not just because he likes farming. Not just because he likes getting up early in the morning, but because the farmer is motivated for the bountiful harvest.

The fruitfulness is going to come over time. So the point here is that discipleship is slow, but it is rewarding. It is rewarding. We live in this kind of microwave instant generation.

We like things fast. We like it now. That is not the life of a farmer. A farmer puts seeds into the ground and then labors over them and weeds and tends them and waits.

There's a lot of waiting in agriculture. And the waiting can be so slow. It can seem like to your eye that nothing's even happening. You may even feel like that. Been following Jesus a long time and the growth, it seems like nothing is happening.

[15:17] I promise you. You are like a seed. If you are planted in the right soil and you're being watered, you are growing, but it's taking time. It's taking time and sometimes you can't even see it.

And there's times that we like to take shortcuts. The shortcuts don't work. Shortcuts can be like, oh, I'm going to go to a conference. I read this great book. Or there's moments that can feel like spiritual highs.

And then we come off that and we think that things have gone wrong. Why don't we have that spiritual high anymore? Well, it's because that conference or that book or that moment, whatever it was, it was just helping you take your next step.

There are no shortcuts. Growth in Jesus is according to his timing and his pace. And like a farmer, we keep our eye on the prize. It's not just about our own maturity.

It's about the fruitfulness that God is going to bring through us. So we welcome you into this journey of discipleship, this long obedience in the same direction. And as you gather in groups, I would encourage you to discuss how have other people been instrumental in your growth?

[16:21] And what are things that you have done to take responsibility for your own growth? And if you're feeling like there aren't others involved, what would it look like to seek out people that can invest into you and mentor you and be spiritual fathers and mothers to you?

God bless you guys. God bless you guys.