

Church 101: Discipleship and Joyful Service (Acts 11-14)

11:19: *those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.* ²⁰ *But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene [Africa], who on coming to Antioch [NT Syria] spoke to the Hellenists [Greeks] also, preaching the Lord Jesus.* ²¹ *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.* ²² *The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.* ²³ *When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,* ²⁴ *for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.* ²⁵ *So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,* ²⁶ *and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*

This is the first time the word Christian is used for Christ's ones or Christ's followers. Christians are simply disciples, what they started calling disciples in Antioch. This is Christianity 101. It's like Vince Lombardi saying 'this is a football.' This is discipleship, making disciples, like the great commission Jesus gave in Mt 28, not as a coach, but as a Commander with all authority in heaven and earth. Discipleship starts with repentance in v. 18, God's gift to sinners. In v. 18 it says God grants repentance unto life; we glorify Him, that's our part. In v. 21 it's because the Lord's hand is upon us that people turn to the Lord. People turn to the Lord after He turns/opens hearts (16:14).

That grace produces gladness in serving the Lord here in v. 23. It calls for man's response in discipleship as well, as Barnabas exhorted these disciples in v. 23: *'When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose...'*

Barnabas rejoiced in his ministry as he saw the grace of God and he gladly served and urged the further discipleship of the Christians to be faithful and purposeful in their discipleship with steadfastness, to be resolute and remain true to the Lord. Barnabas rejoiced in grace and NKJV says he "*encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.*" For today's study in our studies through Acts, I want to look at discipleship and joyful service. We're commanded in God's Word to '*serve the Lord with gladness*' and '*make disciples*,' that's discipleship. It's not just evangelizing

the unsaved, discipleship is encouraging the saved to rejoice in the Lord and to remain true to the Lord. Discipleship includes exhorting disciples to keep the faith and stay faithful. The goal of Mt 28:19 is making disciple-makers who make disciple-makers. Our faith is to be a reproducing rejoicing faith. So I want to look at 2 truths that stand out in this section of Acts 11-14, first discipleship, and then secondly joyful service, and I think they're connected. I'm using discipleship in the broad sense of purposeful relationships to help fellow disciples be more Christ-like. Not just relationships, but purposeful relationships to help disciples be more Christ-like. In v. 26 it involves being with them, it says they were meeting with the church and teaching disciples over a period of a year, and it's here that they began to call them Christians. This is Christianity 101, or Church 101, continual discipleship of Christians.

[it requires life-on-life relationships, pursuing Christ with others]

Our great commission is not '*make decisions for Christ*,' it's '*make disciples of Christ*.' Decisions are not disciples necessarily. A profession of faith isn't always a possession of saving faith, as some of the most famous evangelists will say there's a high percent who respond positively but aren't regenerated. Missiologists talk about the importance in missions of follow-up, because a person doesn't usually become a follower of Christ by themselves. Without discipleship, fellowship, relationships, we don't have NT Christianity. There needs to be biblical churches as a central part of this process. Well-meaning para-church organizations can help but lack health if they don't root their discipleship ministries in local churches. Discipleship in the church like we see in Acts is often a weak link and many times it's a missing link altogether

Acts doesn't give us a program, it gives us a pattern. It started in Acts 2 with the first church devoting themselves to teaching and fellowship, it says they met as individuals in houses. Their discipleship wasn't just on Sunday or in the big temple gatherings, Acts 5:42 says "*Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching...*" (HCSB). Not only formal teaching in the house of God, there was also informal teaching taking place in the houses of God's people. They shared meals, shared life, shared truth.

If we look at Acts 12:12 we see disciples prayed together in their homes. It says in the house of Mary, mother of John (aka Mark), disciples gathered together and were praying. So part of discipleship is just disciples praying together. For those who ministered, part of discipleship included looking for people to bring alongside them in ministry, to observe/serve as we see in v. 25: *Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.*

One of the goals of discipleship and leadership is to involve others in the ministry, to bring them along to observe or to serve when appropriate. My wife and I used to be involved at our first church in a ministry they called Discipleship Evangelism where you meet in homes, you gather to pray, and then you go out to obey the great commission in groups of 2 or 3. One in each group was someone who had already been discipled and trained how to share the gospel, and he or she would do most of the talking for the first few weeks. The newer people would observe and be ready to share for part of the time their testimony, and a little more as they got more comfortable. Then by the end of the 12 weeks or whatever it was, the goal of the discipler was to speak less and less and have the newer disciples talk more and more, and then afterwards he or she would encourage or give constructive input. It was a great application of what I see in Acts with Mark, later Timothy, etc.

[Jesus also sent disciples out in pairs, not on solo missions]

I want to come back to Acts 13 for our second point on joyful ministry, but in Acts 14 there's another example of discipleship, observing Paul as mentor and main speaker with Barnabas, the two apostolic sent ones. In Acts 14:9 it says a crippled man *'listened to Paul speaking.'* And in v. 10 Paul heals him.

¹¹ *And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"* ¹² *Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker ...* [but notice how Paul responds in v. 15] *"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God ...* [that's the essence of becoming a disciple, turning from vain idols to a living God, as Paul goes on to say, He's the creator and sustainer of all, this is how they made disciples. v. 21 sums it up] ²¹ *When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned ...* [that's the same Greek word for "make disciples" in Mt 28:19, only other usage in NT]

Disciple-making or discipleship starts with proclaiming the gospel message. The gospel message isn't 'I'm ok, you're ok.' It's 'I'm *not ok* and *you're not ok*, we all have the same nature as sinners with our false gods, we deserve the wrath of the true God, that's the bad news. But there's good news, God is gracious, turn from your sin and trust in Jesus who bore God's wrath for sin'

Some say 'accept Jesus into your heart,' but the biblical phrases are believe, call, repent, turn from your sin and idols to a living God as your creator and sustainer and plead with Him to be merciful to you as your Lord and Savior.

Us accepting truths about Jesus doesn't save us, God must make us accepted as Eph 1:6 says "*His grace...made us accepted in the Beloved*" (NKJV). We don't accept Jesus as a part of our life, Jesus must be our life and our Lord.

Salvation isn't my invitation to come in my heart, it's God's replacement of my heart. It's His regeneration (changing) of my heart leading to repentance from a new heart. How do we know when that has happened? Not because of something we said or did right a long time ago, we know we're a disciple because of the Word in our life, its continuing abiding impact in us. Jesus said in John 8:31 '*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.*' If you have life you'll bear '*fruit and so prove to be my disciples*' (Jn 15:8).

True disciples, true Christians, are known by bearing fruit and the abiding power of God's Word in their new life. A disciple is transforming, turning. There's a cost to discipleship and a call to discipleship--death to self and sin:

- "*Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*" (Lk 14:27). That's not talking about bearing with an annoying coworker or in-law ('I guess they're just my cross to bear'). It's not putting up with a pet peeve or problem in life. In NT times, a person carrying a cross meant one thing. What is it? I'm a dead man. My life is over. That's how discipleship starts, dying to self and sin, rejecting '*even his own life,*' to '*renounce all that he has*' (14:26, 33).
- In the parallel in Mt 10 Jesus explained this means we leave our old life and loves at the cross, we love Jesus more than any relationship, even our family, as we take our cross (die to self and sin) and follow after Him, He says if we lose our life we'll find it/save it (v. 37-39).

Are you a disciple of Christ, as He defined it? If not, come to Jesus today as His humble learner and follower. He says in the next chapter: '*Come to Me ...learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart...*' (11:28-29). There is a yoke, He is the Master, there is a cost to discipleship, but Christ is worth it. If you've never come in faith and been made a disciple as Jesus described it, come, cry out to Jesus as your Lord, your Master, call on His name in faith, turn from your sin and self, trust in Him as your only Savior and treasure. If we can help you be a disciple, shepherds up front after service can pray with

Steve Camp sings: 'Come unto Him all ye weary, come and find your rest.

Consider the cost of building a tower, it's a narrow way that you must come

To do the will of the Father is to follow the Son

To love Him more than father or mother, to love Him more than even your own flesh

To give all that you are, for all that He is, this is the gospel according to Jesus'¹

We sing: 'I will go wherever He is calling me, I lose my life to find my life in Him, I give my all to gain the hope that never dies, I bow my heart, take up my cross and follow Him'²

There is a cost, the path of the cross is not easy, but its reward is eternal. In v. 22 this is an important part of discipleship. In v. 22 they're '*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*'

Discipleship is strengthening the souls of disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, teaching them the cross and tribulation is a normal part of a pilgrim's progress on the way to the celestial city. Some people in their zeal to make disciples sometimes unwittingly make false converts to a false idea that if they come to Jesus all will be well, but that's not the NT gospel.

Instead of making disciples, some make discouragement with well-meaning gospel presentations that have truth in them but leave out the truths Jesus taught. God can graciously save with an imperfect presentation but if they're true disciples they're being weakened, not strengthened like v. 22 and not being prepared for tribulation. Some say we go to heaven safe, tribulation-free. But v. 22 says the church must go through tribulation. Jesus promised '*In this world, you will have tribulation. But take heart...*' We can take heart, we're not appointed *to wrath* (1 Th 5:9, whatever your end time view, God's wrath isn't for us). But we need to strengthen our hearts for tribulation that is appointed for us also in 1 Th 3:3-4, same book, tribulation, but not wrath:

[*'we are appointed to this...[to] suffer tribulation...*' NKJV]

We need each other for tribulation and persecution ahead. Modern America has been in a naive vacuum from the rest of the world but that rug is being pulled out from under us. We need to seek discipleship in our lives and as v. 23 gives the pattern, we need to put ourselves under elders in local churches. We need eldership and local church relationships for healthy discipleship. In v. 28 mature believers spent much time with new believers. Discipleship takes time, speaking the word like v. 25, checking back in with them like v. 26 says, gathering with the church, v. 27, much time with disciples, v. 28.

For some of you, discipleship may be hindered because you haven't asked for it publically in joining a church, coming under its shepherds, committing to be a part of the discipleship of others. For some of you, the very process of discipleship is being short-changed because you're not seeking teaching by being here regularly, morning and evening services, a big part of disciple making (ex: Col 1:28 "*teaching...to present everyone complete in Christ*").

I'd recommend starting there. Remember the basic meaning of a disciple is a learner seeking to be a committed follower, so commit to the church, to learn when the church gathers, and to follow others as they follow Christ.

After corporate worship services, talk to people like v. 22. Talk to disciples who need strengthening or encouraging to keep going, look out for them. In the evening services we share prayer requests. Pray for them, let them know you're praying and check back in with them. We're going to be doing more testimonies in our night services and those are great opportunities to hear of how others have become disciples and to be encouraged in your discipleship

The principle of mature believers discipling or teaching newer believers, as we see here, was later commanded in Titus 2. Older men are to be mentors and models to younger men in dignity, speech, conduct, self-control, etc. It says older women also are to teach younger women to love their husbands, love their children, to be modest, workers at home, submissive to husbands ... basically everything the world is not teaching women, the exact opposite. Does our church believe in women in ministry? Absolutely. That's a huge ministry right there and it's as important as my ministry behind this pulpit.

I know of young moms here who've sought that out. Young and old need to seek it. It doesn't need to be a formal sit-down time with desk/chalkboard, you could get together for coffee or at one of your places, and go through a book together, maybe reading a chapter at a time, talking about it, pray, etc. There are books for that in the recommended reading section of our website. It doesn't require a program or a pastor or elder permission, just purposeful relationships seeking fellowship around the truth, encouraging discipleship.

Our world encourages us in other directions. Some people go to a church of 3: me, myself, and i-Pod. That's not discipleship or a relationship. It's great that you can listen to great sermons as a supplement, but not as a substitute. Discipleship requires real-life interaction with real people in your life. Our world has gadgets that keep us connected to the world wide web all the time but we're becoming less and less connected to the real-life world around us.

Our world is making distractions that can interfere with making disciples. It used to be we used phones to talk to people. But now cell phones often keep people from talking to people they're with, as we've all probably seen with families at tables at restaurants or out in public (or that's been some of us). Ironically, phones become a way to avoid talking to people in some cases.

Our world is good at making devices but those sometimes make it hard to make disciples in ways we may not realize. You use your phones to block people you don't want to hear from or better yet, un-friend them. But smart phones don't make you wise. They have a place but can't take the place of life-on-life face-to-face relationships and discipleship. It doesn't help the next generation's development, discipleship, maturity when the average high-schooler is on a small screen 9 hours a day (games, videos, texts).³ Carl Trueman says childishness is 'a textually transmitted disease.'⁴

If parents don't disciple kids in the Word, they'll be disciplined by the world (and not teaching them Scripture is still teaching what mom and dad value). Worldly values and vain things and idols are calling out to this generation, but this passage calls us to turn from vain things and idols to the living God.

It's ok to have a tablet, but don't let it violate the tablet made out of stone by God with 10 commandments on it, starting with put nothing before God. An iPad can become an idol-pad if you're not careful (as we warn our kids).

Am I against iPads, iPhones? No, although I have an Android phone ☺ It's a wonderful thing to have GPS and to listen to the world's top preachers on a small device. I use computer Bible study tools 10+ hours every week and I don't mind you use Bibles on your phones or tablets as long as the volume is off. But I'll also tell you it was wonderful this last week to be on vacation with no cell or internet access, fully unplugged and engaged. Our kids need face-to-face attention in family devotions and family discipleship and so do spouses. Discipleship starts in the home around the table, as Ps 128 says, as your family members grow spiritually in family worship like that Psalm. Or as Deut. 6 commands, parents are to teach their children when they sit at the house and walk (or we could add drive today), before bed or in the morning.

Our family takes time after dinner at the table to study, sing, and pray, but I lately have also have been trying 1-on-1 discipleship dates with each child (study on true beauty for girls, Proverbs 4 for our boys, McDees, InNOut). However we apply it, discipleship is Christianity 101 for Christian families and church families. Let's be disciplined in and be discipling with the Word. Let's be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves. And let's move to the application of our 2nd point in closing, our joyful service.

Right here in Acts 14:17, joy or gladness is part of God's common grace. It says in v. 17 God leaves this witness: *He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.*

That's God's common grace but there's also His special grace through Jesus
 - Acts 2:26 quotes David saying because the Lord *'is at my right hand...my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad ... You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.'* (2:26, 28 NKJV)
 - As Peter preaches the gospel, v. 41 says 3,000 *'gladly received his word'* and v. 46 adds *'house to house, they ate their food with gladness...'* (NKJV)
 - that joy and gladness wasn't just when things were going great, later when they're persecuted, it says *'they went on their way...rejoicing'* (5:41 NASB)
 - as the gospel spreads to Samaria 8:8 says *'there was much joy in that city'* and as it spreads to Africa in that chapter, Philip *'went on his way rejoicing'*

Look back at the end of Acts 13, where the Jews are evangelizing Gentiles:
⁴⁷ *For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."* ⁴⁸ *And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed ...*
 [v. 52 adds] *And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

Even in persecution contexts like here and Acts 5, they had joy and served the Lord with gladness. Man's chief end is to glorify God and *to enjoy God*, and both are essential in serving God. Go back to Acts 11 where we started: Acts 11:23 *When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose ...*

Notice Barnabas had a gladness based on grace. He had a gospel-produced joy. Barnabas sees God's grace and Barnabas is glad, so he serves the Lord with gladness in using his gift to encourage them. Without joy in Jesus you can't faithfully remain in effective ministry calling people to rejoice in the Lord. Without enjoyment of Christ in your heart, your encouragement of others won't go far. If we don't have joy in ministry, not just for a week or 2, but for quite a season, we may need to consider a season off or step back.

By ministry I don't only mean people on stage or up-front, ministry is just a NT word for serving in the church, and it would include less public roles or serving with children. My AWANA leader when I was in elementary school had an evident joy in the Lord, was glad to serve, loved to be in church, had a delight to sing, and that impacted me more than any of the counsel times. On the other hand, if you're here Sundays or serving out of a sense of duty, not a sense of delight in the Lord and His people, it impacts those you serve. People can tell if you serve because it's your job or your joy, duty or delight

Peter says it this way ‘*serving ... not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be ... eager to serve ... being examples... Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling ... If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory*’ (1 Pet 5:2-3, 4:9, 11 NIV)

That’s why this matters, because it impacts God’s praise and glory in Jesus. The joy of the Lord is to be our strength as we glorify Jesus and enjoy Him. God is not glorified by outward obedience that’s a joyless duty or drudgery. Better not to do it than to do it grumbling. The Lord loves a cheerful giver, and He delights to use less talented people who serve from delight, not duty.

Leaders even of kids impact others as they lead by example, lead in worship or what they say, and so Hebrews 13:17 urges they serve with gladness, that their work would be ‘*a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you*’ (NIV, i.e., those they serve). Other versions say if people don’t lead or serve with joy, it ‘*would be unprofitable to you*’ (NASB). We need to take God’s calls to gratitude and gladness seriously, or take a break from serving and take some counsel if needed, or take time to study (I’d suggest Psalms).

Ps 37:4 commands ‘*delight yourself in the Lord...*’ (reflexive/responsibility) Ps 100:2 commands ‘*serve the Lord with gladness.*’ It’s not an opinion, and it’s not optional. God is serious about us not being all serious and joyless. In all seriousness, a book that may help some is *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy*, by John Piper (repeat). When I suggested the Psalms, notice as you read commands to rejoice and be glad, or places it speaks of joy, study the context and verses around those commands for help. Notice how they prayed. Notice how they praised. And notice what they prized.

If Jesus is prized and praised, not your preferences or desires, if He’s your desire, delight, treasure, service can be a pleasure. If Jesus is your treasure, service is your pleasure. Let’s pray to prize Jesus, then praise Him in song.

¹ Steve Camp, "Consider the Cost."

² Keith and Kristyn Getty, "What Grace is Mine."

³ As cited by John MacArthur at the 2014 Shepherd’s Conference (opening message).

⁴ Carl Trueman, "No Text Please, I’m British!"