

Disciples Growing, Lesson 1:

The Forgotten Part of the Great Commission

OPENING UP

1. DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE “GOOD AT” STUDYING THE BIBLE? WHY OR WHY NOT?

2. IF SOMEONE ASKED TO STUDY THE BIBLE WITH YOU, HOW WOULD YOU REACT? HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU THAT YOU COULD ANSWERS SOMEONE’S QUESTION THROUGH BIBLE STUDY, OR BRING SOMEONE TO CHRIST BY STUDYING WITH THEM?

INTRODUCTION

I suspect that by the end of this study you will have memorized the great commission. We are going to read it a lot:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- Matthew 28:16-20

As we noted previously, the main command here is to “make disciples”, but Jesus also gives three additional instructions about how to carry out that command. We often talk about “go” and “baptize”

(or “immerse”), but it’s that third thing that will be the focus of this study. We cannot be satisfied that we have made a disciple until we have carried out the last part: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”.

But wait, how many of us have reached the point where we observe *all* that Jesus commanded? And if we haven’t reached that point, how can we teach others to? While we know that we won’t ever follow all that Jesus commanded perfectly, we can reach a point in our lives where we know *how to discover* all that Jesus commanded and can be confident we can continually spot our failings and learn how to correct them.

ALL THAT I HAVE COMMANDED

How much did Jesus command? We know that he commanded more than what is recorded for us in the gospels:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

- John 20:30-31

The gospels give us a good, solid snapshot into the life and teaching of Jesus, but they are not the complete teaching of Jesus. They can’t be, simply from a logistical point of view. Remember, the gospels were written at a time when copying and distributing the written word was expensive and specialized; the brevity of the gospels part of their design, and a big reason the message of Christ spread so quickly in the first century. So what about the rest of the story?

The apostles spent three years travelling with Jesus and learning from him. They learned from the master upwards of 12 hours a day for three years. How long will it take the average person today to replicate that kind of learning? And at the end of all that, the apostles weren’t even ready to carry out the great commission! They need a kickstart, a special helper to guide them in the task. Jesus told them as much toward the end of their time together:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

- John 14:25-26

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler

of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

- John 16:7-15

There is a particular brand of modern American Christianity that wants to strip away everything but what Jesus explicitly said and did in the gospels, but that misses the point of Jesus's promise to those who would carry on his work. Jesus did not tell them everything while he was alive, but rather promised to send someone who would tell them the rest of Jesus's commandments. Jesus told them that the Holy Spirit would do two things: he would "bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" and he would "guide you into all the truth". We can read about when the Spirit of Truth descended upon the apostles in Acts 2, and from that point on they declared the whole truth of Jesus. Implied in the promise is that, before that point, they didn't know the whole truth.

Thus, if we want to fulfill the great commission and teach people to observe *all* that Jesus commanded, we can't stop with the explicit words of Jesus recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We must continue to learn all that the apostles taught, because what they taught was from Jesus too!

THE DAILY GRIND

Remember, the disciples spent most of their waking moments for three whole years learning from Jesus, and they still didn't learn everything there was to know. More than that, Jesus didn't expect them to remember everything perfectly without divine assistance, even after all that time. Let's conservatively estimate that Jesus spent four hours a day teaching them during his earthly ministry. Some days might have been less, but many days would have been more. (What do you think they were doing while they walked everywhere from town to town?) So, four hours X three years X 365 days = 4,380 hours. Let's round down to 4,000. After 4,000 hours of intensive learning from the master teacher himself, they still hadn't heard it all and they still weren't ready to carry out the great commission on their own.

How long will it take you to get to 4,000 hours of learning from Jesus? From the congregational assembly, a person might reasonably expect to get two hours a week (45 minute Bible classes and 20 minute sermons on Sunday and Wednesday). At that pace, it's going to take 35-40 years to get to 4,000 hours of discipleship. But remember, 4,000 hours isn't even enough!

What's the point? The process of becoming a disciple of Jesus, of becoming like the master, isn't one that can be accomplished quickly. It certainly can't be accomplished by learning in the general assembly alone. If every Christian waiting until they received 4,000 hours of discipleship from the

general assembly before trying to make disciples, the church would die in a generation. The early church knew that becoming like Jesus was a lifetime goal that required *daily* commitment.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

- Acts 2:42-47

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

- Acts 17:10-11

Note that of course learning *with other Christians* was a large part of their discipleship. But that learning was not something they did once a week, it was something they did daily. And even if you can't learn in a group setting every day, you *can* study the commands of Jesus on your own every day. Discipleship is not a part-time activity!

If you have fallen out of the habit of daily Bible study, it might take some work to get back into it. Forming a new habit takes work and diligence. It's just like working out, eating right, or making time to be with your spouse. These things do sometimes happen in the natural course of living, but being consistent requires making a plan and sticking to it. Over the next week, take some time to make a plan for Bible study. When will you do it during the day? Where will you do it? Like forming any other habit, be intentional about the specifics. Consistency, ease of repetition, and practice are the keys to success!

DISCIPLES GROWING DISCIPLES MAKING DISCIPLES

The command is to “make disciples” and part of that command is to “teach them to observe”. So, if we want to be good disciple-makers, *we* need to know what it is that we are to be teaching. This is the divine cycle of Christian growth, empowered by the Spirit both in the inspiration of the Word of God, and in the inner strength of the Spirit in us! We study the words the Spirit gave to us (words that come from Jesus and the Father), and the Spirit helps us internalize the teaching and empowers us to live out our discipleship!

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

- 1 Corinthians 2:12-13

There is a double meaning here. We have received the “Spirit who is from God” in two ways. First, we received His presence and power into our hearts when we were immersed into Christ. No wonder immersion is a part of the great commission! It is through immersion that we are given His Spirit! He then helps us understand “the things freely given us by God”.

But what are those things? This is the second way we have received the Spirit: the inspired word! Not only does the Spirit live in us, He lives in the words He breathed into the hearts of the Bible writers. The great commission, the path of discipleship, and the work of the Church are all cyclical: people receive the Spirit through belief, repentance, and immersion, and then continue to invest in the Spirit through continual learning and study, and then enable others to receive the same Spirit through disciple-making. Ideally, the cycle will continue until Christ returns!

So, as we discuss how to study the Bible in this class, keep in mind:

1. STUDYING THE BIBLE IS PART OF BEING A DISCIPLE OF JESUS. If I want to become like the master (what it means to be a disciple) then I need to know what the master taught. The gospels are a good place to start, but ultimately all of the Bible was given to us by Jesus, part of the triune Holy God.

2. LEARNING HOW TO BE BETTER AT BIBLE STUDY WILL HELP YOU TEACH THE LOST. If I want to help others learn how to “observe all that Jesus commanded” I first need to have some idea of what that is. As we learn how to more effectively and efficiently study, we will be able to use these tools to do the same with others.

3. UNDERSTANDING BEGINS AND CONTINUES THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT. Of course, there is some amount of discipleship that begins without the Spirit in our hearts (before we are immersed), but the Spirit is still involved in that part through the truth of the Word! When we are immersed, we receive the ability to more fully understand “the things freely given us by God”. Don’t underestimate the power of God working through our study of His Truth!

This is my prayer for us as we learn together. I encourage you to pray it too!

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

- Ephesians 3:14-19

DIGGING DEEPER

1. HOW OFTEN DO YOU STUDY THE BIBLE BY YOURSELF? WITH A SMALL GROUP?

2. THINK ABOUT YOUR SCHEDULE. WHAT ARE SOME WAYS YOU COULD MAKE MORE ROOM FOR BIBLE STUDY IN YOUR LIFE?

3. HOW OFTEN DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT IN YOUR LIFE? DO YOU OFTEN PRAY FOR HELP IN UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE? IF NOT, WHY NOT?

Disciples Growing, Lesson 2:

Approaching the Word

OPENING UP

1. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INDUCTIVE AND DEDUCTIVE REASONING? DON'T WORRY IF YOU DON'T KNOW, BUT WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU THINK THEY MIGHT BE.

2. HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL WHEN PEOPLE "READ INTO" YOUR WORDS, AND SAY YOU MEANT SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T MEAN?

INTRODUCTION

One of the most insidious, damaging questions a bible-study leader can ask a group is "what does this text mean to you?". It's those last two words that are the most harmful, because they automatically imply that Scripture might mean something different to each reader. But (with some exceptions) we don't treat other forms of communication that way. A memo from your work leadership isn't open to interpretation by each employee. A note from your parents doesn't have some hidden meaning for one sibling and not the other. There are a couple principles that we instinctively apply to other forms of communication that we tend to leave out when it comes to the Bible. But these principles are of the utmost importance if we want to understand the Divine Message given to us by our Creator.

Everyone comes to the Bible with different levels of knowledge, insight, and experience. But the Bible is constructed in such a way that, if we approach God's Message on its own terms, everyone should be able to reach the same conclusions. That's why Jesus and Paul prayed for such unity

among Christians (John 17:20-21, Philippians 1:27). They knew it was possible! But only if we approach scripture with these basic ideas in mind.

PRINCIPLE 1: FACTS BEFORE THEORIES

There are two main ways of processing information and understand our world. One is to begin with big, general ideas, and to use those big ideas to inform our understanding of specific situations. This is *deductive reasoning*. A lot of scientific pursuit is based on this reasoning: one starts with a theory, or *hypothesis*, and tests individual scenarios to see if they fit. The line of reasoning “All spiders have eight legs → a tarantula is a spider → therefore, a tarantula has eight legs” is a deductive argument. It starts with the big idea (all spiders have eight legs) and proceeds to the specific (the tarantula).

Deductive reasoning is something we do all the time, but it carries a big danger. Deductive reasoning is only good if *the starting premise* (the big idea) is true. If we start with a false idea, and conclusions we reach about individual circumstances has a good chance of being wrong. This brings us to the other kind of information-processing: *inductive reasoning*.

Induction begins with a bunch of specific, smaller facts, then puts those pieces of information into a coherent big picture. The also happens in science, of course. Induction and deduction go together. A hypothesis (big idea) leads to experimentation, which gives results (specific factual information) which then leads to revision of the hypothesis.

What does all this have to do with Bible study?

Our default approach to life tends to be *deductive*. We have our ideas about the world, our big pictures about life, and then we interpret any specific event or piece of information through those lenses. But that approach will not lead to understanding the Bible on its own terms. It will only lead us to accept the things in the Bible that we already think and believe. Our approach must be *inductive*. That is, we must gather the information of scripture (all of it, each verse and chapter and books forming discrete “facts”) and put it together to form the bigger picture. We can’t start with our general conclusions before we study, because our conclusions about the nature of reality and righteousness must be informed by what we discover in study. Jesus himself taught this:

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

- Mark 2:23-28

The Pharisees were using deductive reasoning: “No one should ever do any work on the Sabbath” → “They are picking grain” → “Picking grain is work” → “They are breaking the law”. They started with the big idea, the theory they thought was true, and then reasoned from there. But Jesus uses inductive reasoning in his response, by bringing up a specific piece of information (the story of David in 1 Samuel 21:1-6) which contradicted their theory. This specific piece of knowledge demonstrated that their premise (no one should ever do any work on the Sabbath) was faulty. They needed to examine the *whole* of the Old Testament teaching and example about work and the Sabbath before they could arrive at the proper conclusion, just like we need to put our own ideas and conclusions out of our minds *before* we approach the Bible. We must let the Holy Spirit speak for himself through the words he inspired and look at the totality of his teaching before we try to draw any binding conclusions.

PRINCIPLE 2: AUTHOR DETERMINES MEANING

Many people rail against the pervasiveness of relativism (the idea that truth is subjective to each person) in our culture, but then approach the Bible with a relativistic mindset. When we interpret scripture through our individual lens of feeling and experience, *we* become the determiners of meaning. But we aren't the ones who determine meaning.

The Bible didn't just fall from the sky, devoid of context. It was written by real people with real motivations and intentions, addressing real problems of real congregations and individuals. The authors (and by implication, the Spirit who inspired them) were trying to convey something specific to their audience. What gives us the right to say that their intent was incorrect?

This is not to say that the Bible has no meaning for us. Far from it! But the Bible was not written to us. To properly understand what the authors were saying, we must consider their context and intent. The Bible writers, not we ourselves, get to determine the meaning of what they wrote, because *they* were the ones “carried along by the Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). To be even more explicit, the Holy Spirit chose to say these specific things to these specific people to address these specific problems. Through inductive reasoning we do make general application for our own lives, but we can't do so at the cost of the original meaning. To say that we know better than him is arrogance in the extreme. We must continually remind ourselves that the Spirit said what he meant to say within the context of the people of the time; any meaning we draw from the text that contradicts this is from us, not the Spirit.

This is not just something people struggle with today. Jesus fought this mentality as well.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father

or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

- Matthew 15:1-9

The explicit command of God was simple: “honor your father and mother”. But Jesus also spelled out the implied intent of the command: God wanted the people to care for their fathers and mothers financially. The Pharisees had reached a different conclusion by replacing the original *authorial intent*.

The intent was that parents would be cared for, but the Pharisees had supplanted that with another intent; if I give my money to the temple, I don’t have to use it to support my parents. As long as I give my money to God, it doesn’t matter what commands I leave undone. But God said what he wanted! If he had wanted more money donated to the priestly service at the cost of parental care, he would have said so! This is what is meant by “author determines meaning”. We must let the author mean what they say, instead of trying to reach conclusions based on our own intentions and circumstances.

Jesus was clear about the results of supplanting authorial intent: the Pharisees were far from God. They thought they were worshipping God, but God didn’t want their worship. Not letting the author mean what they meant in their own context only leads us farther and farther away from God, no matter what *our* intentions are.

PRINCIPLE 3: UNDERSTANDING REQUIRES APPLICATION

The first two principles generally apply to most forms of human communication, and we apply them almost without thinking about it. These principles form the way you subconsciously process emails from your boss, letters from your child’s school, and texts from friends. But the Bible is not just another human communication. It is Divine, and the message inherently carries far more weight and obligation. Therefore, we must go beyond what we might think is reasonable for an email or a text. Proper understanding of Scripture demands some sort of change or response in our lives! Until the Holy Spirit’s truth has changed our hearts and actions, we cannot claim to truly understand his truth. The Word of God is powerful, and that power affects change!

In speaking of the Israelites who rejected God after the Exodus and had to wander in the wilderness for forty years, the writer of the book of Hebrews makes an important point about God’s promised rest:

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

- Hebrews 4:6-13

The writer underscores several times that application must follow understanding. They "received the good news" but did not enter the rest of God because they did not obey. They did not mold their lives around the message they heard. Specifically, even though they had been promised rest, they were too afraid to face the natives of the land of Canaan. The specific failing of the Israelites serves as a general warning for us: not to "fail by the same sort of disobedience". The Word of God cuts to the heart of our lives, because it is the thing by which we all "must give an account". We know the promises and hope of God; does that hope cause us to do things we otherwise wouldn't?

As we approach Scripture, we cannot just be seeking to know the right things. There is a certain comfort in knowledge, but knowledge is not enough! Every book of the Bible demands some sort of change or response on the part of the readers. We must read the words with the acceptance that what we read *will* demand change. If we are not willing to change, then we will miss the point of studying!

CONCLUSION

In our study of God's word, we must put aside our preconceived ideas and worldviews, and let the Bible speak for itself. We do this by putting *facts before theories*, and letting the actual, concrete information contained in Scripture lead us to broader understanding and general applicaiton. We do this by letting the *author determine meaning*, and seeking to understand the text as it was written, instead of seeking to place our own cultural net over our understanding. But after everything else, we must be able to look at our lives and point to the things that are different because we studied the Bible. If you can't see anything like that in your life, then you haven't studied the Bible effectively. *True understanding requires application!* As we study, continually ask what you could change in your life as a result of what you are learning.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. HOW DO YOU PRIMARILY PROCESS INFORMATION? DO YOU START WITH THE BIG IDEA, THEN MOVE TO SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES, OR DO YOU START WITH SMALLER PIECES OF INFORMATION AND BUILD A BIGGER UNDERSTANDING?

2. WHY IS IT TEMPTING TO ASK, “WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME?” INSTEAD OF “WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?”

3. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU FORMED A NEW HABIT (EITHER BY STOPPING A BEHAVIOR, OR ADDING A NEW BEHAVIOR) AS A DIRECT RESULT OF SOMETHING YOU READ IN THE BIBLE ON YOUR OWN?

Disciples Growing, Lesson 3

The Power of the Word

OPENING UP

1. HOW OFTEN DO YOU CONSCIOUSLY, INTENTIONALLY DO THINGS THAT YOU KNOW WILL HURT YOU? HOW OFTEN DO YOU CONSCIOUSLY, INTENTIONALLY LEAVE UNDONE THINGS YOU KNOW WILL HELP YOU?

2. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU FELT TRULY CHANGED BY SOMETHING YOU READ IN THE BIBLE?

INTRODUCTION

Habitual Bible study (like habitual evangelism) begins with our attitude about the Bible. Do you think it is worth your time? Do you think there is power in Bible study? Until we believe that there is true, life-changing power in God's word, we will not feel incentivized to study it deeply.

Words have power. You have probably heard the expression "the pen is mightier than the sword". Whole civilizations have risen and fallen by the power of words. Another phrase that we use, but we know instinctively to be untrue: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me". We say this to children so that they can have some measure of protection against the cruelty of their peers, but we all know it isn't true. I am confident that most of us have been hurt more by words than by flesh and blood.

Words also have incredible power to heal, inspire, and renew. Can you remember a time when someone said exactly the right thing when you were hurting? How did that feel? Words, because they are conduits of thought, are the way we connect with one another. I can't create a *banana* with

my words like God can, but when I say *banana* I can create an image of it in your mind, and I might even be able to create the illusory sensation of taste or smell in your subconscious. This is the power of words. And God's word, because it is from the one being who *can* speak things into existence (Genesis 1), has great power.

POWER OVER HUMAN NATURE

We read this text in the last lesson, but let's return with a different emphasis:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

- Hebrews 4:12-13

We wouldn't typically consider a book to be "living and active", but the Bible is not just a book. The words in it are inspired by the Almighty Creator of all things. They have power because of who wrote them. The one who wrote them knows everyone who will read them most intimately:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

- Jeremiah 17:9-10

We barely even understand ourselves! Our emotions, our thoughts, even our perceptions mislead us and deceive us, either through intentional self-deception or through the misunderstandings of ignorance. Because we are imperfect, we will always arrive at an imperfect understanding of ourselves and of the world around us. But the one who inspired the words of the Bible is perfect and knows *all* things. Therefore, those who read his words are gifted with supernatural insight. In the words of this book, we see God's intent for mankind and how we have made a mess of things. If you want to find purpose, meaning, and understanding, this holy book is the place to go. These words can show us who we are and what we could be. If we let them, they can help us build lives of deep purpose, meaningful relationships, and confidence in the future.

POWER OVER UNCERTAINTY

The authors God inspired were explicit about their purpose in writing:

...it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

- Luke 1:3-4

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

- John 20:30-31

The Bible is constructed in such a way as to give us certainty about certain things. Luke and John wanted their readers to have certainty about “the things you have been taught”, namely that “Jesus is the Christ”. And a careful study of John and Acts can do that! But there’s more to be had than even that profoundly important knowledge.

Through a study of scripture, we can have confidence about many things that plague humanity: our origin, our purpose, our destination. But more than that we can grow confident in the things of this life. How can I build better relationships? How can I be successful in parenting? How can I overcome my personal problems? These are questions that God has answered for us!

Certainly, the Bible does not grant us omniscience; there will always be things we don’t know or are uncertain of. But the certainty that comes from deeply devoting ourselves to the study of God’s word covers the most important aspects of our existence.

THE POWER TO SET US FREE

The human struggle is one of bondage and oppression, in many cases to people and empires, but more often to the prisons of unclear, corrupted thinking. When we rely on our own ability to correctly perceive reality, we will inevitably fall prey to many kinds of thought distortions. These distorted ways of thinking lead us to behavior that not only doesn’t make us happy, it actively makes us miserable. That’s why Jesus promised:

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

- John 8:31-32

Discipleship is the core of this study, and the path to discipleship is to “abide in” the words of Jesus. What does that mean? It means to make them part of our daily lives, to shape the way we live around his words. Then the truth “will set you free”. Free from what?

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

- Romans 8:1-2

For one thing, God's truth frees us from guilt, shame, and condemnation. I don't have to live in guilt because I know the path to forgiveness. Often when we can't let go of guilt and shame it's because we haven't lived out all that God teaches to the best of our ability. When we don't "abide in" his word, of course our problems persist! But when I live out what God has said, in regard to how I have sinned against God, but also in how I should address my failings to others, then I can find the freedom God provides.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

- Galatians 5:1-6

Jesus's truth also sets us free from the burden of man-made obligation. So many people want to enslave our hearts and minds with falsehood, fear, and empty promises. But when I center my life on God's word, those things become obviously false. In the original context of Galatians Paul was warning against those who wanted to remain in the Old Law, but the point could apply to anything that people try to bind on us above and beyond what God has commanded. God's truth sets us free from all the ways the world and the Devil would deceive us.

THE POWER TO CHANGE

As we will continue to emphasize, the power of the word is delivered through the Holy Spirit. It's impossible to delineate all the ways the Spirit works through his word to transform and change us. Peter originally promised that those who were immersed into Christ would receive "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Jesus, as we have read several times already, included immersion as a key aspect of disciple-making. As we grow in our discipleship of Jesus, the goal is to be "conformed to the image of" Jesus (Romans 8:29). We are promised the ability to change!

The power that catalyzes our transformation comes from the Spirit in two ways that feed off each other and form a reinforcing feedback-loop.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have

strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

- Ephesians 3:14-21

The “Spirit in your inner being” is a source of spiritual power and strength! Unlike the apostles, this power is not to perform miracles or do the supernatural, but it is still awe-inspiring, mighty power. It is the “strength to comprehend”. It is the power to “be filled with all the fullness of God”. It takes spiritual strength to understand God’s truth! There is a purpose to this spiritual strength:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

- Colossians 3:5-11

The goal is *change*, true renewal that comes from knowledge. The Spirit empowers us to understand real, eternal truth, and then uses that understanding to enable us to change. This change is “putting to death what is earthly in you” and “putting on the new self”. The Spirit, through both his indwelling and his inspired words, creates new life in each Christian. No wonder Jesus commanded the disciples to immerse the lost and then teach them all that he commanded!

Do you believe that God’s word can change you? Do you trust that the Spirit will help you understand? Maybe we don’t devote ourselves to study because we don’t think we will be able to get it. Maybe we doubt our intelligence, or our reasoning ability. But God promised that those who have his Spirit will have the ability to understand, and that his truth would enable us to change. So why do we fail so often?

CONDITIONAL POWER

It’s one thing to say we believe that God’s word is powerful, and it’s another thing to *feel* it. I can help you with the first, with what you *think*, as we see what the Bible has to say about itself, but only you and the Holy Spirit can create the right kind of *feeling*. Jesus, in the parable of the Sower, put conditions on the power of the word that is sown:

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

- Mark 4:20

Only those who “hear the word and accept it” can expect to reap the benefits. It depends on our willingness to accept the truth at face value, without trying to hedge or make it mean what we want it to mean. But maybe you feel like you are struggling with this, with believing in the power of the word. Maybe it has been a long time since you felt the transforming power of God’s word. That’s why it’s so important to develop a consistent habit of Bible study. The power of God’s word does not rest in us, it comes from the one who gave us his word. And he wants to help you, despite your doubts and insecurities! Trust in his promise that as long as we are doing our best, he will bless us:

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

- 1 John 3:19-24

DIGGING DEEPER

1. WHAT DO YOU WANT THE POWER OF THE WORD TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR LIFE? IS THAT OUTCOME SOMETHING THAT THE SPIRIT HAS PROMISED TO THOSE WHO ARE DISCIPLES?

2. LIST SOME THINGS YOU ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT THAT HAMPER YOUR FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE TO GOD. AS WE GO THROUGH THIS STUDY START THINKING ABOUT HOW YOU COULD APPLY THESE LESSONS TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO THOSE UNCERTAINTIES.

3. IT’S EASY TO SEE WHEN OTHERS HAVE FALLEN INTO A BAD WAY OF THINKING, BUT HARD TO SEE THAT IN OURSELVES. WHAT ARE SOME WAYS YOU COULD DISCOVER DISTORTIONS OR FALSEHOODS IN YOUR OWN THOUGHTS?

Disciples Growing, Lesson 4

The Authority of the Word

OPENING UP

1. WHAT IS THE BIBLE? IF SOMEONE ASKED YOU WHAT THE BIBLE WAS, WHAT WOULD YOU TELL THEM?

2. HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO AUTHORITY? DO YOU INSTINCTIVELY PUSH BACK AND REBEL, OR DO YOU NATURALLY WANT TO FOLLOW THE RULES IN WHATEVER SITUATION YOU ARE IN?

The idea of *authority* is intrinsically tied to the great commission, and the pursuit of God's holiness. The mission itself stems from Jesus's authority:

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

- Matthew 28:16-20 (*emphasis added*)

"Authority" is a touchy subject, as it ever has been. It's easy to say you think the Bible has authority, but it's much harder to live as if that were true. Humans instinctively rebel against authority from a very early age, and it's easy to develop the habit of only submitting to authority out of fear or when whoever is in charge agrees with you. Even among people who claim to believe the

Bible is the word of God, there are many different interpretations of what it means for the Bible to have authority. So, let's look at the authority of the word, and what that means in practical terms.

AUTHORITY AND JUDGMENT

Authority is derived, in large part, from the ability to judge or to discipline. This is what gives parents an intrinsic amount of authority, as well as governments. Because we all understand the link between authority and judgment, it is easy to treat the Bible as just a book of rules, something akin to a legal manual. But while submission to the authority of God's word is the only way to avoid judgment, God is not his word. His standard of righteousness comes from who he is, not what he has said.

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

- Romans 2:12-16

Sin and righteousness are determined by the character of God and our ability to match his character. What determines our eternal fate is not how well we follow the Bible, but how well we live up to God's righteousness. His holiness and perfection are the standard, independent from any written word. We all must face judgment not because we fail to do everything in the Bible, but because we cannot live up to the standard of God's holiness. This may seem like a trite distinction of semantics, but it can profoundly alter the way we read the Bible. The Bible is not the thing that condemns us, but the thing that shows us how to avoid the condemnation that we were destined for already because we cannot live out the sense of morality inherent in us.

Do you think of the Bible as a burdensome list of regulations? If so, it's going to be very hard for you to live out what you read, and very tempting for you to try to circumvent its teachings (we will come back to this). Alternatively, if you think of the Bible God's lifeline, a way of escape from wrath and his way of showing us how to be the people he created us to be, then the Bible is not a burden but something more akin to a life-saving medicine!

Don't misunderstand; it is true that if we disobey what we read in the Bible we will be condemned, but a person can live in a way contrary to God's word without knowing what God's word says. Judgment is not dependent on our knowledge of the words in the Bible. But only by knowing God's word can a person avoid that condemnation through faithful obedience. The thing that the Bible

offers is not more rules, but the knowledge of what the rules are and how to follow them. The Bible shows us how to be saved and how to live out that salvation:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

- Romans 10:14-15

The "good news" is that God wants to redeem, forgive, and save us. The Bible reveals God's plan for our redemption and tells us how to be a part of it. Its authority comes, not from itself, but from the one who gave it to us. It has authority because "it is breathed out by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). Because *he* is the ultimate judge and creator of all things, he sets the standard for judgment and how salvation can be had. This book has authority because it comes from the only one who can have any real authority.

So, when we reject the authority of scripture, we are like a drowning person who rejects the offered life preserver. We are not any more lost than we were before we heard the message, but only by submitting to the message can we be saved.

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

- 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12

Do you love the truth? There's a couple of ways to think about this. You could love the concept of truth, love that truth exists and is discoverable. Or you could love the specific content of truth, the specific things that are true. Either way, because God determines the nature of reality, anything he says is the truest thing. Do you love what God has said? This is the only way to be saved!

AUTHORITY AND CULTURE

One of the things that makes it hardest for us to accept the Bible's authority is the fact that if we do so, we will be forced to think and do things that our culture does not accept. In the modern context, this most specifically comes up regarding "the role of women" and sexual morality.

It is tempting (and many have succumbed to the temptation) to claim that only *some* parts of scripture carry authority for today, and that some only carried authority for the specific culture in which they were written. Of course, it is true that only some parts of the Bible carry specific

authority for today's practice and living. The law given to God by Moses is one such part of the Bible, a part that once showed people how to avoid God's wrath but no longer does.

But the key distinction is that the Bible *explicitly* says that the Old Law no longer has that authority. This is one of the main points of Acts! So, we could (and should) easily accept the overall authority of scripture *and* reject the binding nature of part of it, if the Bible itself says to do so. But that is not what is happening when people allow culture to overrule the Covenant of Christ.

It was always expected that people who submit to the authority of Jesus would be different than the rest of the world in both practice and ideology:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

- John 15:18-20

That last line is the real game-changer. *If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.* Jesus knew that those who followed him would also need to follow the teaching of the apostles. Further, he knew that their teaching would lead the world to hate those that followed that teaching. We should expect that submitting to the authority of the Bible will lead to conflicts with culture. Jesus promised it! Paul later promised Timothy something similar:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

- 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Unlike the teachings of the Old Testament, Jesus and his inspired prophets did not delineate what parts of their teaching we should follow or not (with a couple very rare exceptions that we will discuss later in this class). They expected all who would read their words to follow all of it! When we do not let *the author determine meaning* (from lesson 2), we do exactly what Paul warned Timothy about: having itching ears, we accumulate for ourselves teachers to suit our own passions (in this case, passions determined by what the wider culture around us likes and believe to be moral).

There's never any indication given in the New Testament that the authors thought their teachings would eventually need to be changed or replaced as culture changed. They acted and spoke like what they said was the final word until Jesus's return:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

- 1 Peter 1:22-25

Peter says that the word of God *abides*. It remains, it lives in and with us. It is *imperishable*, it cannot die or pass away. It *remains forever*. This attitude, combined with the myriad promises that we would face persecution if we submitted to God's truth, makes it so abundantly clear that what the Bible plainly says must carry more weight in our hearts and minds than what the world around us determines. Culture cannot supplant the authority of the word!

Jesus himself confronted this kind of attitude. People reject the authority of scripture sometimes because they don't understand it, and sometimes because they don't like it. Jesus, in John 6, taught that those who would follow him must “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood”. Because they didn't understand what he meant, this is how people reacted:

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

- John 6:60-66

Note that this was not random people or the pharisees grumbling. This was his disciples! They didn't understand or like what Jesus was teaching, so they “took offense” and left. But the words that Jesus spoke to them were “spirit and life”. By trying to force Jesus's teaching into their worldly (fleshly) way of thinking, they were forced to reject the life he offered! When we allow what our society thinks about morality to supplant the meaning and authority of the Bible we too will be forced to reject the life offered to us in scripture. As we have read before:

...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

- 2 Peter 1:20-21

AUTHORITY AND LIFE

Fortunately, not all his disciples had that attitude:

So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

- John 6:67-69

Accepting the authority of scripture means that we shape our actions and worldview around what the Bible says, and not the other way around. The attitude of Peter is so beautiful here. Where else are we going to go? To culture? To our friends? To ourselves? These places do not offer eternal life like Jesus does! As we saw in the last lesson, only God’s truth offers us life, freedom, and true meaning.

If we believe that Jesus is the “Holy One of God” then we must accept all that he taught, and all that his apostles taught. Only by molding our lives around the truths, principles, and commands in the Word of God can we come to know God and enjoy “confidence for the day of judgment” (1 John 4:17).

So then, we come to the obvious question: If we want to approach God’s word on its own terms, and accept its power and authority in our lives, how can we read it in such a way as to arrive at a true, full understanding of its truth? Thus, we will shift our focus to more practical matters of Bible study as we go forward.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. IS THERE ANYTHING IN THE BIBLE YOU DON'T LIKE? WHY DON'T YOU LIKE IT? HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOUR WILLINGNESS TO OBEY GOD?

2. ARE YOU MORE MOTIVATED BY PUNISHMENT OR REWARD, EITHER AT HOME OR AT WORK OR IN YOUR PERSONAL HABITS?

3. DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE BIBLE MORE IN TERMS OF “IT TELLS ME WHAT NOT TO DO” OR “IT TELLS ME WHAT TO DO”? HOW DO YOU THINK THIS AFFECTS YOUR READING OF IT?

Disciples Growing, Lesson 5
Honoring the Author