

Discipleship

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Our Lord's final commandment to His Church was not 'make members,' and it was not 'make attenders.' It was make disciples. That single word has shaped the entire Christian centuries since, and it should shape every servant's understanding of what he has been sent to do. A disciple is not a religious consumer; a disciple is a person being conformed, over a lifetime, to the image of Christ — and who is, in turn, helping to form others into that same image. This is the work the Lord has placed into our hands. It is not reserved for a few specialists; it is the ordinary calling of every baptized Christian, and especially of every servant. In this lesson we will sit with the Great Commission, trace the contours of what discipleship actually looks like in the Gospels, and learn from Scripture and the Fathers how the servant who has become a disciple makes disciples of others. We will find, tenderly, that the road has been walked before us by our Lord Himself, and that He is still the one doing the real forming — through our small, faithful, ordinary hands.

A Commandment, Not a Suggestion

There is a way of reading the Great Commission that turns it into a slogan for overseas missions and then quietly sets it on a shelf. Our Lord did not leave it on a shelf, and we must not either. The words He spoke to His apostles on the mountain in Galilee were His very last instructions to His Church before He ascended, and there is no accident in their form:

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18–20, NKJV)

Every clause bears weight. All authority has been given to Me. The Lord does not send us in our own authority; He sends us in His. Go therefore. The imperative follows from the authority; we do not go because we feel brave but because He has commissioned us. Make disciples. Not converts only, not hearers only — disciples. Of all the nations. No group is exempt; the commission reaches to our neighborhood and our own extended family as fully as to the ends of the earth. Baptizing them. The initiation into discipleship is sacramental, not merely intellectual. Teaching them to observe all things. The forming of a disciple is a long apprenticeship, not a short information transfer. And lo, I am with you always — the sentence we carry into every class we teach and every conversation we hold.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, commenting on this commissioning, drew out what our Lord had actually promised:

“He does not send them into the world bare of His help. He sends them with Himself. ‘I am with you,’ He says — as though He were saying, ‘Wherever you open your mouth to teach, there I also am; wherever you kneel to baptize, there also are My hands; wherever you instruct a soul in the way of life, there also is My heart.’” — St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, on 28:20

This is the blessing the servant needs most. Our labor in discipleship is not a lonely one. The Lord Himself is with us in every conversation, every lesson, every prayer, every long car ride with a struggling disciple. He has not handed us this work and walked away; He has handed us this work so that He might walk with us through it.

What the Gospels Mean by 'Disciple'

Before we can make a disciple, we must know what one is. The word itself, in Greek, is *mathētēs* — a learner, an apprentice, one who walks behind a master and picks up the master's life by association. Our Lord did not invent the concept; there were many teachers in Israel with their own disciples. But He transformed the concept, because He was not asking for apprentices in a craft but for souls in the whole of their living.

The Gospels sketch, in a dozen different scenes, what a disciple actually does. A disciple leaves what he was doing and follows:

“As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ So he arose and followed Him.” (Matthew 9:9, NKJV)

A disciple sits at the Master's feet and listens before he speaks:

“And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word... ‘One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.’” (Luke 10:39, 42, NKJV)

A disciple loves his brethren with the love he has received from the Master:

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35, NKJV)

A disciple carries a cross:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Matthew 16:24, NKJV)

A disciple remains in the Word over time:

“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31–32, NKJV)

And at the end, a disciple bears fruit — the fruit of his own disciples, made in his master's likeness, not in his own:

“By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.”
(John 15:8, NKJV)

Six small sketches, and together they form a living portrait. The disciple has followed, has listened, has loved, has carried a cross, has abided in the Word, and is now bearing fruit. No one moment along that trajectory is the whole of discipleship. Discipleship is the whole trajectory, walked together with the Master and with those He sends us to.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing out of a tradition that took these words as seriously as a handbook, summed it up in one gentle line:

“The disciple is not the one who has learned much from the master, but the one who has become like the master. Knowledge is the doorway; likeness is the whole house.”
— St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, XXIII

Knowledge is the doorway; likeness is the whole house. The servant who measures the success of his discipleship only by the number of Bible verses his disciples have memorized is a servant still living in the doorway. The whole house is down the hall.

The Master's Method

If we want to know how to make a disciple, we would do well to watch, closely, how the Master made His own. Our Lord did not publish a curriculum and hand it to the Twelve; He lived with them for three years, and their formation happened largely through the ordinary friction and grace of that shared life. The Gospels are, in a sense, case studies in discipleship method.

First, He called them by name. He did not put out a general invitation and hope the right souls showed up. He walked up to Simon and Andrew and said, 'Follow Me.' He walked up to James and John as they mended their nets. He called Matthew from his tax booth in the middle of a work day. Each disciple was called personally, by a Master who had already taken the trouble to know him. Every servant who makes disciples today does the same work: he knows the people entrusted to him not as a crowd but as a set of faces, names, stories, and seasons.

Second, He spent time with them. Not an hour a week, but the whole of the hours. They walked with Him on the road. They ate with Him. They went fishing with Him. They saw Him tired, hungry, misunderstood, praised, attacked. They saw Him pray. This is what formed them. The Lord did not cut any corners on the duration of the relationship, and neither can a servant. Discipleship cannot be microwaved. It happens on the long road, over many cups of tea, across the small and large seasons of life.

Third, He taught them as they were ready. He did not dump every truth into them at once. He spoke in parables to the crowd and then, privately, explained the parables to the Twelve. He withheld certain teachings until they could bear them (John 16:12). He let their own questions shape what He revealed

next. This is the holy patience that every discipler must learn. A disciple is not a bucket to be filled; he is a flower being grown, and he opens at the speed the Spirit sets for him, not at the speed of our schedule.

Fourth, He sent them out. After a season of watching Him, He began to send them out in pairs to do what He had been doing. He let them fail. He received them back. He corrected them tenderly. He sent them out again. This rhythm of send-and-receive is crucial. A disciple who is never given responsibility to do the work never becomes a disciple; he remains a spectator.

Fifth, He promised to remain with them after He was gone. The whole discipleship project was never about creating dependence on Him in His earthly form; it was about creating a confidence in Him that would survive His ascension and grow into the great sending of the Church.

St. Gregory the Great, whose Pastoral Rule is among the great discipleship handbooks of the ancient Church, named the Lord's method in a single sentence:

“Christ did not teach first and live afterward. He lived first and taught out of His living. The servant who would make disciples must take the same order seriously: let life precede lesson, let example precede exhortation, and the Holy Spirit will do in a year more than a decade of mere words could do.” — St. Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, II.3

Life before lesson. Example before exhortation. This is the order our Lord kept, and it is the order every disciple-making servant must keep if his work is to bear the kind of fruit that lasts.

The Chain Across the Generations

Discipleship is not an island. Every disciple is a link in a chain that reaches back to the apostles and forward into a future none of us will see. The beauty of this chain is that each link is ordinary; no one has to be extraordinary for the chain to hold. It holds because the Lord holds it.

St. Paul draws the chain with unforgettable precision in his last letter to Timothy:

“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV)

Count the generations in that single verse. Paul — Timothy — the faithful men — the others also. Four generations, in one sentence. This is not the Apostle doing long-range strategic planning; this is the Apostle simply describing how the Gospel spreads. It spreads through relationships, across generations, by the deliberate choice of each disciple to invest in someone who will in turn invest in someone else.

The servant who thinks of himself merely as a teacher of his current class has missed the deeper calling. His current class is not the end product; it is a set of future disciplers. The young man in the youth group who is quietly watching how the servant prays is, in some real sense, already a

fourth-generation disciple of St. Paul — and will, if God wills, pass the chain to a fifth generation the servant himself will not live to meet.

This is why our Lord cared so intensely about the Twelve. He was not merely training twelve good men; He was planting the seed of the entire future Church. Everything we enjoy in the Orthodox Christian life today — every Father we read, every hymn we sing, every priest who hears our confession — reaches us through that original apostolic planting and the many, many humble disciple-makers who have kept the chain unbroken since.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the second century to defend the apostolic succession against heretics, wrote one of the gentlest and most confident sentences in all of patristic literature:

“The Church, though scattered throughout the whole world, guards the one faith she has received from the apostles, as if she occupied but one house. She believes these points just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart. For the languages of the world are various, but the power of the tradition is one and the same.” — St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, I.10.2

One house, one soul, one heart, across all the centuries and all the continents. That is what the chain of discipleship has produced. And every servant today, by the faithful forming of even one disciple, is contributing to that one house.

The Cost and the Promise

Our Lord never hid the cost of discipleship. He spoke of it plainly, with a tenderness that warns but does not frighten. He wanted every soul who followed Him to count the cost beforehand so that the yes, once given, could stand through whatever came:

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:26–27, NKJV)

The word hate is a Semitic idiom, not a call to family resentment. The Lord is saying plainly: nothing, not even our dearest human loves, may be placed above Him in the ordering of our heart. A disciple is one for whom Christ is first, and everything else dearer to us is held more tenderly precisely because Christ is first. This is not a reduction of our loves; it is the purification of them.

But He balanced the cost with a promise, and the promise is extravagant:

“Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time — houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions — and in the age to come, eternal life.” (Mark 10:29–30, NKJV)

A hundredfold now in this time. Not in the age to come only, but now. Every disciple who has walked far enough along the road knows what this promise means. He has discovered that the family of Christ is wider than his blood family ever was. He has discovered homes open to him in every place his feet have taken him. He has discovered a joy the world does not know and cannot take. The cost was real. The return is a hundredfold. The Lord does not exaggerate His promises.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage to a congregation that included many who had suffered for their faith, spoke the truth with the force of pastoral experience:

“No one has ever truly given anything to Christ and walked away poorer. Count the gift; count the return; then count again. The arithmetic of the Kingdom does not resemble the arithmetic of this world. In His hands, every offering multiplies.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, LXIV

Making Disciples This Week

How, practically, does a servant make disciples this week? The question sounds ambitious, but the answer is refreshingly ordinary. Disciple-making is a habit, not a campaign. It is built from small, repeated practices that compound over years into souls shaped for Christ.

First, it begins with our own discipleship. We cannot make in others what we have not allowed the Lord to make in us. The servant who has stopped reading the Scriptures for himself cannot make Bible-reading disciples. The servant who has grown cold in prayer cannot make praying disciples. The soul of discipleship is contagion; what we have becomes what our disciples catch. Let us tend our own fire first. The Lord is not going to shame us for doing so.

Second, it asks us to know our disciples by name. Most of us serve in contexts where the people entrusted to us are numerous: a youth group, a Sunday school class, a choir, a parish. We cannot disciple everyone equally. We can, however, know everyone a little and a few people deeply. The Lord gave Himself to the multitude but to the Twelve in a different way, and among the Twelve, to Peter and James and John in a different way still. This is not favoritism; it is capacity. A servant who invests deeply in a handful over years leaves a deeper legacy than a servant who invests shallowly in hundreds for a season.

Third, it asks us to be interruptible. So much of the Lord's own discipleship happened in unscheduled moments — a conversation by a well, a question from a blind man at the roadside, a child brought forward by a mother. A servant too busy for interruptions will make, over time, very few disciples. A servant who has learned to receive interruptions as assignments will find the Lord doing some of His richest work precisely through the moments our schedule had not anticipated.

Fourth, it asks us to pray by name. Long before anything else, a servant's disciples need to be carried to the Lord in prayer. The servant who prays for his disciples every morning — naming them, thanking God for them, asking the Holy Spirit to form each one — is doing more disciple-making at seven a.m. than anything he could possibly say from a podium at seven p.m.

Fifth, it asks us to be patient with the Spirit's timing. Some disciples grow quickly; others grow slowly; many grow in unexpected seasons, long after the servant had given up waiting. Our work is to remain faithful. The Spirit will decide when the fruit ripens, and some of the sweetest fruit of our service will ripen on trees we will not see bear.

May the Lord of the harvest, who Himself made the first disciples and who still calls each of us by name, give us grace to be faithful disciples ourselves and faithful makers of disciples. May He fill our small and ordinary investments with His own abundant life. And may He bring us all, at the end of our long service, into the company of those good and faithful servants who have invested what they were given and are welcomed, by a smiling Master, into the joy of their Lord.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord's command in the Great Commission is to 'make disciples,' not merely converts or hearers (Matthew 28:19–20, NKJV). What is the practical difference between making a convert and making a disciple, and how does that difference reshape the way we measure the fruit of our own service?
2. The Gospels sketch a disciple as one who has followed, listened, loved, borne a cross, abided in the Word, and borne fruit. Which of these six features is most vibrant in our own discipleship right now, and which needs the Spirit's watering most urgently?
3. St. Gregory the Great says the Lord 'lived first and taught out of His living.' Where in our own ministry have we been tempted to teach ahead of our living? What would realigning that order look like this month?
4. St. Paul's chain in 2 Timothy 2:2 reaches across four generations in one sentence. Who are the one or two disciples the Lord has placed within our reach to invest in deeply — not just to teach but to form — and what is the next step with each of them?
5. Our Lord balances the cost of discipleship with the promise of a hundredfold return (Mark 10:29–30, NKJV). Where in our walk with Him has this promise already proved true, and how does remembering it strengthen us to keep walking when the cost is currently heavy?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 28:18–20; Matthew 9:9; Matthew 16:24; Luke 10:39–42; Luke 14:26–27; John 8:31–32; John 13:35; John 15:8; Mark 10:29–30; 2 Timothy 2:2 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, on Matthew 28.
- St. Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, Book II (on the life of the one who teaches).
- St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies (on apostolic succession and the rule of faith).

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, especially Homily LXIV.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies (on likeness as the goal of learning).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes