

the twelfth step

Having been given so much by God ourselves, use every means to encourage and support those who join us on the path of discipleship, as we abide ever more closely in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and in fellowship with the Holy Spirit

God's nursery

As the family of God, we share a relationship with each other that lasts for ever - we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and our kinship should always find expression in mutual love and support. Yet there is often the opportunity (and the need) for a *special* relationship to be developed between Christians. In the last session, we talked about the joy of sharing the gospel, and acting 'as midwife' in the new birth...but 'babes in Christ' need nurturing - *they need 'mothers and fathers in the faith'*.

One of the most important things we can ever do, is to play our part in bringing 'younger' Christians to spiritual maturity. *Our church is God's nursery* - it is where his precious children learn and grow...and it is our privilege to contribute to that process, freely giving from what we have freely received.

Building up those who are young in the faith has been a priority ever since the church began. The writings of Paul bear witness to this - they are not only examples of his 'fatherhood in the faith' to whole church communities, but they frequently contain encouragement and teaching for specific individuals. Most obviously, we can see this in his letter to Timothy, who he actually addresses as '*my true son in the faith*' (1 Timothy 1:2). Paul had many sons and daughters in the faith. In that respect, the only difference between our calling and his is likely to be one of *scale*...though even *his* ministry started in a small way!

Paul was a gifted teacher, encourager and writer, but everything he did for others was underpinned by *prayer*. Praying for others - especially new Christians - is absolutely essential, and even if we don't get the opportunity to do much else for them, we should always do that. Aside from the direct benefits of prayer for their situations and themselves, it will also enhance *our* ability to relate to *them*. The reason? The more we pray for another person, the more we will love them. It's as simple as that! Deeper love is likely to lead to a deeper understanding, and will *always* lead to a growing desire to help a person become everything that Jesus wants them to be.

Reading the letters of Paul, it becomes very clear that he gained deep satisfaction from nurturing others. Of course, there were individuals and groups - like the church in Corinth - that would exasperate the most patient man...yet Paul always persisted, because love never gives up. But in the letters as a whole, his delight in his role as spiritual mentor comes across time and again - for example, when he describes the church at Philippi as "*...you whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown...*" (Philippians 4:1)

"*My joy...*". A recurring theme of this programme has been the connection between doing God's will and being personally blessed out of all proportion to any effort or sacrifice that we are called to make. It seems that every act of obedience is rewarded, and every act of service enriches *our own lives*...even as it touches the lives of others. Nowhere is that more in evidence than when we are helping to build a firm foundation for new Christians: We can *expect* to feel the joy of our Father's presence, and to *know* the fulfilment that comes from

co-operating with the Divine Plan. While the motivation for any service must always be *love*, God delights in those who put love into action...and he's always keen to show it! So let's see just how we can bless others, and - at the same time - invite God's blessing on ourselves.

pass it on!

One obvious way to encourage and support those who join us on the path of discipleship, is to help present a course like this one. We can effectively pass on the experience and knowledge we have gained in this kind of structured setting. Incidentally, it's a great way of keeping up the momentum of our own spiritual growth...simply because *we draw closer to Christ as we draw others towards to him*. A discipleship group can be a wonderful place to start serving new Christians, as the freshness and enthusiasm of people who have just completed a course can be a powerful inspiration to those who are just beginning.

Co-presenting a discipleship programme allows us the immense privilege of helping others lay the foundations of their faith. It is work which will have profound implications for those we serve, and our input into some individuals may bear fruit beyond our home church - even producing a positive effect in the wider 'body of Christ'. Discipling is a supremely important activity. That being so, it should be no surprise that - however effective it can be in the formal setting - *it goes on all the time!*

Discipleship is the normal process of Christian development. It can be greatly accelerated by a focussed, fast moving programme - but it still happens whether or not there is a course in progress. That's because everything we do that teaches, nurtures or builds up another human being in their relationship with God may be considered 'discipling'. When the teaching is good, and when the nurturing comes direct from the heart of another Christian - from a real 'mother or father in the faith' - it can be a powerful stimulant for personal growth. As those who have already embraced discipleship ourselves, we are well equipped to play a role in bringing others into spiritual maturity... but how do we do that *effectively*, outside of the structure of a programme? How do we build up and bless new Christians, on a one-to-one, *informal* basis?

"You know my methods" (Sherlock Holmes)

The great fictional detective was fond of encouraging his side-kick - Watson - to emulate his techniques. They *were* the best methods after all, but Watson wasn't very good at implementing them. The trouble was...he just wasn't a 'Holmes'. He didn't think like Holmes - he lacked his mentor's deductive prowess. Simply put, *he couldn't do the same job because he didn't have the same mind*.

What's that got to do with building up new Christians? Well of course, it has absolutely everything to do with it, though *we* are concerned with something of rather more importance than 'sleuthing'. We're going to emulate the methods of the greatest *disciple-maker* ever, and (unlike Watson) we will succeed in *our* task...because we *do* have the mind and power of our master. We have his Holy Spirit, we are being conformed to his likeness...and, as 1 Corinthians 2:16 points out - "*... we have the mind of Christ.*"

When we add to that Christ's *methods*, we will be entirely ready to help others come into a deeper relationship with him - giving vital support and encouragement, and assisting them towards a mature and dynamic faith. So let's have a look at how Jesus helped others reach their full potential...

First contact!

Jesus never imposed himself on anyone. There was no compulsion to respond, no conditions made - he just invited people to follow or to spend time with him. No doubt he recognised the needs or the potential of those he met, but a relationship with him - then as now - was optional...however beneficial a relationship would be. Moreover, his first disciples could choose their level of involvement with him, and even choose to leave him altogether.

If we are going to serve as mothers or fathers in the faith, we will first have to identify who our 'children' are likely to be! Most obviously, a person who has recently become a Christian would be a 'candidate', or perhaps someone who is finding things difficult. Prayer will be decisive in successfully identifying those who can benefit from our support...but we don't rush in and impose ourselves. Nor do we insist on any formal arrangement, because that's not going to be the nature of our relationship. Rather, we will gently try to *befriend* this person - we are going to 'come alongside' them, and they can have as much (or as little) of our company as they like.

Moving on...

*Jesus **built** relationships. He took a personal interest in those around him, and he loved them in their failures as much as when they were succeeding. People knew they were valued by Christ, because he didn't just talk...he also listened to what **they** had to say.*

Love is the key to a quality relationship, love that is unconditional - free from condemnation when someone fails. Love begins the moment we start seeing another person through the eyes of Christ. A *relationship* often begins the moment a person realises that we genuinely care, when they see us take an interest...when they know that they matter to us. As likely as not, that moment will come when they understand we want to hear what they have to say. People have opinions about all kinds of things...and they will frequently make a direct connection between our desire to hear *those*, and our desire to know *them*.

Teaching...

Jesus was able to successfully impart a phenomenal amount of teaching to his disciples - including concepts even top theologians would have struggled with - precisely because he taught in the context of relationship.

If we go through the gospels looking for occasions when Jesus taught large numbers of strangers in a formal setting, we won't find too many. By far the greatest part of his teaching was done among the disciples, sometimes with small groups of them, or even with individual followers. He taught through relationship - often as a situation arose, a remark was made...a question was asked. It could happen when they were walking or eating together, or when they were just sitting around chatting. Our opportunities to pass on our experience and insights are likely to come the same way. We don't need a specific 'calling or gifting' as a teacher to make a valuable contribution like this - we only need to be walking as disciples ourselves, and be willing to share the wisdom we have gained with someone else. If we are going to help and support another Christian, we will need to spend time with them - to draw close to them. A functioning, vibrant relationship between Christians is a wonderful thing of *itself*, but it also offers some of the best opportunities to teach and encourage!

modelling Christianity!

We could look at other aspects of how Jesus related to his disciples - his *method* - but really, it all comes down to *love in action*. The opportunities to teach and encourage flowed from a loving relationship. If we can sum up Christ's method as 'love in action', we can also summarise what we will be doing for the new Christian: *We will be modelling Christianity for them.*

Modelling Christianity - demonstrating through our actions the nature of Christ - is the most precious gift, the most profound learning experience we can offer to a 'babe in Christ'. It inspires, it sets an example for them to follow, it can be our greatest contribution to the bedrock of their faith...and all we have to do is relate to them the way that Jesus would!

Nurturing others, and our own continued development as Christians, are closely related. It seems the more we serve, the more capable servants we become...the more we love, the more love we will have. In this sense, 'parents in the faith' and their 'children' are *mutually dependent* - each contributing to the development of the other. And that's a very good reason to exercise prayerful humility when 'coming alongside' another Christian!

Of course, our ability to model Christianity for others depends on the quality of our own relationship with God. Step twelve acknowledges this link, and we come alongside new Christians...*as we abide ever more closely in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and in fellowship with the Holy Spirit.* We want to give them our best. In simple terms, that means we are looking to *continue deepening* our relationship with God. How do we do that? *We just take the opportunities he gives us!*

"ever more closely..."

The Christian life is crammed full of opportunities to draw closer to God...because that's what being a Christian is all about! He wants us to *increasingly* experience his presence, his power and his love, and he has made sure each of us can do just that. "Growing in Christ" is actually built into discipleship, because every time we obey - every time we do things *his way* - we are taking opportunities to know him better...*and* inviting him to give us even more opportunities!

A *developing* intimacy with God, is the natural result of a *continued* response to him. We don't have to do anything new to grow in his power and love - we just remain open to all he has for us, we listen and we obey. Everything he asks of us is an invitation to a closer relationship, and every positive response brings yet more opportunities.

These opportunities will frequently arise in the areas covered by our programme - from prayer and study, through all the various forms of service, into evangelism and supporting new Christians. Even such simple acts as (for example) forgiveness or resisting temptation hold huge potential for us, because God *extravagantly* blesses those who respond to him. There are endless opportunities to increase our faith and our love, just by *using* the faith and *giving* the love that we already have. In short, the path of discipleship is designed to maximise our relationship with God - we only need to take the opportunities as they appear. Our present relationship - and our desire to progress further - will enable us to identify and respond to every invitation God gives us to know him better...and there will be *many!*

Looking forward is exciting, because there really is no limit to what God can do in our lives - unless we impose a limit ourselves, by giving him less than our best. But, looking back can also be encouraging...so let's take a few minutes to consider how far we have already come.

taking stock

In our walk with God, we have already covered a fantastic amount of ground. We have built a firm foundation, and should be beginning to enjoy the fruits of our response to the gospel message - in love and empowered service, in wisdom, knowledge and everything else that God has for his children. Increasingly we should experience a real sense of intimacy with our Heavenly Father. We have everything necessary to make that relationship blossom, and that should also include the enthusiasm and motivation to go even deeper, and the willingness to allow him to completely transform our lives.

We will have a good idea about the extent of our progress from our most recent 'journal'. It will give us an indication of how much we have learnt, and how well we've been able to put it into practice. For some of us, there may be areas where we feel we could do better - but we need not be discouraged! We can go back over the relevant 'step', consider it afresh, and look again at the prayer of commitment. The important thing is that our hearts are set on Christ, and in him we have new life - now and forever. Those facts alone should give us the impetus to successfully tackle any issues we have found a little difficult.

Revisiting the programme, though, is not just about brushing up on any topics that may have been challenging. The programme - *our* programme - encapsulates all the main concepts of dynamic Christian living and (used as a reference resource) can be a valuable tool in monitoring and safeguarding our continual progress. We should remember, though, that the programme just condenses biblical principles into manageable portions - which we've called 'steps'. It can never be a substitute for the Word of God, which really *is* "the most valuable thing this world affords".

If revisiting the programme is advantageous, so, too, is continuing to meet as a group, where circumstances permit. There may be opportunities to work together on (for example) sharing the gospel or discipling others. It could be that we form the core of a new house-group, or just gather informally for prayer or bible-study...but it is certain that any such meetings would bring the blessings of fellowship and mutual encouragement. In any event, at least *one* more meeting is called for...a celebration!

something to celebrate!

What should we be celebrating? Completing the programme, perhaps? Being equipped to embrace God's perfect plan for our lives? Well, this *and more!* The 'more' is what we have *become*....

In faithfully responding to God's call on our lives, *we become something very special*. Of course, being followers of Christ is very special, but consider this:

"You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15)

We have *obeyed*, and we have *learnt* - and we have become more than mere followers, more than just disciples... *we have become people that the creator of all things counts among his friends!*

It was never Christ's intention that our calling stopped at discipleship, worthy though that is. Our obedience as disciples may be thought of (in a very real sense) as the gateway to

everlasting friendship with Almighty God. And, if it is a breath-taking idea that we are 'qualified' to relate to him on that level, we can also remind ourselves of a similar concept in Matthew 12:49... *Pointing to the disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

As we do his will, we truly become the friends and family of King Jesus! Why? Because the 'God of Relationship' always wants to *elevate* his people - to raise them high above what they could otherwise be. And so, the call to follow, learn and serve is also an invitation ...to enjoy nothing less than genuine friendship and kinship with Christ. In accepting the *call* wholeheartedly, we also accept the *invitation* - and we begin to experience real intimacy with God. Having once felt that closeness, it is entirely natural to pursue an even deeper relationship with our Lord - there *is* always more - but that shouldn't stop us celebrating the relationship we have right now!

Summing up step twelve...

1. **We all have something to offer.** Some of us may have specific gifts or abilities which can help others on the path of discipleship, but we all have something to offer...we have **ourselves**. Step twelve is about making ourselves available for others, coming alongside them and acting as 'parents in the faith' for those who are new to 'God's nursery'. It is a privilege and responsibility that we all share - it is both 'general service' and 'love in action'. Coming alongside a new Christian can sometimes be challenging or time-consuming, but it is one of the most fulfilling and rewarding activities we can undertake. As we help lay the foundations of faith, our own will be strengthened, as we draw another person closer to Christ, we ourselves will be drawn...and as we give love, we will receive **more**.

2. **Making our contribution**
 - a) **Group work.** We may be able to help present a course like this one. This would give us a real opportunity to build relationships and make a valuable contribution to the discipleship of newer Christians. We can bring freshness and enthusiasm (as well as our experience and knowledge) to those who are just setting out on their spiritual journey. It's a great way to start having a positive influence, especially for those of us who may not feel quite ready to 'come alongside' others in the wider church setting. If we **are** a little 'shy', playing an important role in discipleship in this way can give us just the confidence we need! But whether we are shy or outgoing, we can all contribute in the group format.

 - b) **Copying the Master.** When we are nurturing others (or doing anything else!) we can't do better than to copy the best. Jesus was, is, and always will be the master at making disciples. He could take the most unpromising, unlikely people, and help them fulfill potential they never dreamed they had. We, too, can give powerful support by adopting some of his methods..which is appropriate, as (in effect) we'll be adopting some of his children!

We do, however, need to share even more than Christ's methods: We need to share his motivation, which is always love. Supporting new Christians should always happen because we see them through the eyes of Christ. It is only love that counts, and only love that will make our efforts productive. **Love comes from a heart-felt understanding of how precious people are to Jesus, but it grows - most often - through praying for them.**

After prayerful consideration, we may feel that we could serve a certain individual by 'coming alongside' or 'befriending' them. Like Christ, we won't impose ourselves on anyone - they must be entirely free to have as much or as little of our company as they want. Also like Christ, we will take the time and trouble to build a relationship, letting the person know they are valued and loved however well (or badly) they are doing. We show them respect and consideration - we listen to them. As we spend time with them and the relationship grows, we will have opportunities to share our experiences and insights with them, which will (in turn) come to be part of their own 'firm foundation'. It is remarkable how often Jesus was able to build-up, encourage and teach his disciples just in everyday social situations. Much of what they learned - including really profound truths - was picked up as they 'hung-out' with Christ. With his motivation and his method, we, too, can be a great source of blessing and encouragement to others, playing a major role in their early development as Christians. We can sum up what we we'll be doing as 'modelling Christianity' - that is, demonstrating by our behaviour and attitudes the love of our Saviour. Nothing could be a greater blessing to the new Christian than to experience the love of Christ in this way.

- 4. Abiding "ever more closely..."** Discipleship is naturally progressive - in responding positively to Christ, we are opening the door to even more opportunities to draw close to him. These opportunities come to all who have submitted their lives to him...to all who have (through obedience) become his family and friends. A wholehearted commitment to Christ has its own momentum - we need do nothing more than continue to live as his disciples to experience his love and power in increasing measure.

In that sense, our programme **doesn't** end today. The 'steps' we took to become disciples are the same ones that will enable us to grow ever closer God, to know more fully his love, grace and power. The commitments we have made are also geared to continual progress, and should yield rich rewards for as long as we hold to them. We just make sure we remain 'eligible' for all he wants to give us, and he will do the rest!

A prayer of commitment

Heavenly Father,

I thank you for the privilege which you have given me - that I may play a role in the discipleship of others. I thank you for everyone who has encouraged me in my faith, and for the opportunities you will give me to pass on that encouragement to others. I now commit myself to taking those opportunities, to listening for your wisdom and guidance about 'who and how' I should come alongside, and to walking closely with you myself - so that I can effectively 'model' Christianity. I further undertake to pray for those you lead me to, and to demonstrate your love towards them. Let me fully understand how precious they are in your sight.

For myself, I pray that you will continue to draw me close - changing everything about me that isn't like Jesus. I commit myself to continue living as a disciple, and to value each opportunity to deepen our relationship which flows from that. I thank you for the power to carry out these commitments - which I know will come from you, in response to my willingness. I thank you, too, for the friendship and kinship with your Son that is so freely given to those who obey. Help me enjoy that to the full, even as I help others discover the joy of that same relationship.

In Jesus' Amen

final thoughts

Where do we go from here? Well, of course there's no general answer to that question, because God's plans are unique to each individual. But perhaps we could think of the future in terms of this verse of scripture: *"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."* (John 3:8)

The verse conveys a wonderful image of those who are 'in Christ'. It seems to speak of being lifted up and carried by the Lord in a way - or to a place - which is beyond the understanding of others, or perhaps even of ourselves. Christianity is really The Great Adventure, and as we learn to trust God, the 'wind of the Spirit' may take us anywhere. There really isn't any limit!

Our programme (in that sense) has been about reducing our resistance to that 'wind', rather than trying to find its direction. What we can say, though, is that a heart-felt response to these biblical principles will have made us eligible for God's most fulfilling, most effective plans for our lives. Everything we have done - every commitment we have made - has led us towards that. In continuing to 'live out' these commitments, each of us becomes *"...an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."* (2 Timothy 2:21)

So prepared, and secure in our relationship with God, it only remains to enjoy our part in the Divine Plan (or "Great Adventure") ...whatever that part may be!