

SERIES Four Chairs of Discipleship
 SERMON **Disciple-maker's Portable Stool (1 Peter 2.9–12)**
 PASTOR Carl S. Sweatman
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—PRAY—

1. PORTABLE

For the sake of time and interest, we'll be brief with this final chair and the one who to whom it belongs. With regard to the one who uses this final chair, we're dealing with the person who has matured through the entire discipleship process and is now ready to go out and make more disciples—in a, more or less, regular fashion. Thus, and to stick with our chair imagery, they have moved from the bench of unbelief, out of the recliner of new belief, scooted around in the rolling-chair of servanthood, and have now adopted the portable-stool. And the reason for the imagery of a portable seat is simple: disciple-makers are those who are mobile, not confined to a given local, and who take their commission with them wherever they go.

2. RECOGNIZING THE DISCIPLE-MAKER

So now that we know who we're talking about, how can we recognize them? What are the indicators or signs? To shake things up a bit: we're going to come at this recognition question in a slightly different way than we've done before. Our approach this time will be to consider the details in and core principles of our passage before seeing how such things relate to the person and role of the disciple-maker, thus enabling us to identify them in our midst.

a. Biblical Principles

To generalize (*just a little*), the overarching theme of 1 Peter deals with the validity of the gospel message as testified by the holy and Christ-like lives of believers. Thus, throughout the letter we see considerable emphasis on how Christians are to live, behave, and even speak in the world. A manner of life, behavior, and speech that is to reflect the radical difference Christ has made in who they are because of His saving redemption. And our little passage for this morning is a part of that larger emphasis. In fact, our passage is (*more or less*) a concluding statement for the argument that runs from 1 Pet 2.1–12, which deals with the need for proper Christian life and conduct. Let's quickly run through it so that we can see this play out.

Similar to the kinds of things that Paul says in his letters, Peter begins (in 2.1) with an exhortation for believers to do away with the old self—specifically the kinds of things that characterized the old self (*e.g., malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander—immorality will get thrown in a bit later in the letter [cf. 4.1–6]*). From this, Peter stresses the importance of the life that is now to be lived because the old self has been removed and replaced. In fact, he explains something like the process of discipleship—or at the very least the process of spiritual development and growth of the believer. And the way he does this is very similar to the stages we've dealt with throughout this series.

In the first stage, he assumes a state of unbelief, which was characterized by a life opposed to the ways of God. But this state was radically changed at conversion. And the result of that

conversion is the second stage: the life that comes from new birth—or becoming a follower of Christ. From this second stage, the believers are expected not to sit and do nothing but find comfort. Instead, they are to enter the next stage, which is characterized by growing up in salvation, or being built up in Christ. And from 1 Pet 2.2, Peter stresses the necessity of continuous nourishment from the Word of truth, and how that nourishment is a leading cause for one’s growth. (*The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit being the other leading cause*). Thus, and to expand upon what Martin Luther said about Paul’s letter to the Romans, we say about Scripture—God’s word: **“It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul.”**¹

When we have a healthy diet of God’s word in our lives, we can more easily resist all of the unhealthy temptations that the world places on the table—trying to get us to indulge in a guilty pleasure. Just once. But we all know it’s never “just once.” To get back to what Peter is saying: the purpose for the healthy, God-honoring growth and being built up (*not just in knowledge of God’s word but also in faith, grace, compassion, and service in His kingdom*) is revealed in the final stage, where Peter says believers are being made into a spiritual house, a chosen people, a holy nation, and a royal priesthood—all of whom are able **“to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”** (1 Pet 2.5). What does that mean? Well, one NT scholar put it this way: **“Virtually everything [Peter] exhorts his readers to be could be considered a spiritual sacrifice.”**²

This means: the life believers now have in Christ—and all the characteristics that go with it—is to be an ongoing offering of true worship. And this echoes what Paul tells the believers in Rome when discussing their need for proper Christian conduct: **“I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service”** (Rom 12.1–2). Thus, spiritual sacrifices represent a life devoted to the truth, wisdom, and ways of God, lived in the light of Christ’s saving work, and reliant upon the Spirit’s equipping for holy living. And spiritual sacrifices are the daily and continual acts of service, which are borne out of an unrelenting loyalty to one’s identity in Christ and to the commission of advancing God’s kingdom in the world.

Or we could theologize this a bit and say: spiritual sacrifices are natural acts of Christian service relating to (*or emanating from*) the distinctive life of holiness that characterizes those who are made new in Christ. And holiness refers not only to a quality of life but also one that is categorically different in its approach and conduct than the wisdom and ways of the world. Or to borrow from the NT scholar, John Elliot: **“holiness involves nonconformity to modes of conduct which are incompatible with the will of God...and obedient conformity to the will of God alone.”**³ This echoes the NT’s resounding expectations for those who no longer belong to the ways of the world but now belong to Christ. With one of the strongest coming in the form of a warning: **“do you not know that friendship with the world means hostility toward God? So whoever decides to be the world’s friend makes himself God’s enemy”** (James 4.4).

Now, here’s where all of this lands and helps get us to where we need to go. As Peter goes on to demonstrate, this categorically different life of those in Christ has a paradoxical effect.

¹ M. Luther, “Preface to the Letter to the Romans,” .

² A. Black, *1 Peter* (College Press, 1998), 62.

³ J.H. Elliot, *I-II Peter* (Augsburg Press, 1982), 78.

On the one hand, the message of the cross (*i.e., one of the two main pillars of the Christian gospel*) will be seen or labeled as scandalous and even offensive. (*Nothing new under the sun*). Or to use the imagery that both Peter and Paul use: it will be a stumbling-block for those who belong to the world and cannot accept God’s wisdom (cf. 1 Pet 2.8; 1 Cor 1.23). So, at best, people will struggle with the claims of the gospel message, and at worst they will reject it. And faithful disciples need to be prepared in how they respond to either one of these.

On the other hand, the new life that is lived in the light of the cross and in the hope of the resurrection (*i.e., the other main pillar of the Christian gospel*) will, at the very least, be recognized as different from how the rest of the world lives. At best, it will result in curiosity, attraction, and even respect. But as Peter intimates, that curiosity, attraction, and respect must be prompted by a life that is honorable before the world—or as Paul says, a life that is “**above reproach**” even among those outside of the church (1 Tim 3.2, 7). And that, by the way, shows us that the Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation or even privatized. (*That’s what the world desires, but it’s not what God expects and commands*). The holy(!) other-than life is meant to be lived in the open, in public, under the scrutiny of the world.

So, while the world may not like the truth claims of the gospel message (*and most of the time: it won’t*), it should have no valid reason to criticize the life that is lived in the light of that message. Moreover, if criticisms do come—and they will (cf. 1 Pet 4.12; Mt 5.11–12)—the life lived must be one that proves such things to be groundless and false. Hence what Peter says a bit later when describing what happens when the testimony of hope is given because of the hope-filled life is recognized by the world: “**Yet do it with courtesy and respect, keeping a good conscience, so that those who slander your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame when they accuse you.**” (1 Pet 3.16). Notice: the shame doesn’t come from the mouth of the believer; rather it comes from the convicted heart of the one who sought to silence and cancel the believer unjustly. And the underlying hope is: from that shame, there comes an honest and faithful recognition for the need of God’s forgiveness and new life in Christ.

b. Personal Characteristics

And as strange as it might seem, that brings us right to the question of how we recognize disciple-makers in the church. We’re brought to this because the characteristics of those in this stage of the discipleship obviously reflect that commitment to living holy lives and allow that holy-living to serve as the ongoing testimony of the truths they proclaim. Thus, when the disciples-makers go out into the world and engage in the process of evangelism, who they are in Christ determines not only everything about them but also how they relate to others in meaningful and life-changing ways for God’s kingdom. So with that in mind, let me give you three of the big characteristics or traits of disciple-makers.

1. Mature in the knowledge and grace of Christ

The first is: maturity in the knowledge and grace of Christ. When Peter ends his second letter, he encourages the believers in this way: “**take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. [i.e., don’t be tempted to build your life on a foundation of sand, or don’t be lured into friendship with the wisdom and ways of the world] But [continue to] grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen**” (2 Pet 3.17–18, ESV). It should be said that “lawless,” in v.17, is a bit too soft and generous. The Greek term, ἄθεσμος carries

the idea of: one who dismantles the restraints of law to gratify personal lusts or desires. Thus: believers are not to be engaged in ways of life that are characterized by uncontrolled, chaotic, and self-interest whimsy. Their lives are to be steadfast in both mind and action, anchored to the truth of God in Christ, and devoted to giving him alone the glory. And that kind of life is achievable through growing in grace and knowledge.

But what does that mean for disciple-makers? It means: disciple-makers are those who ensure that they themselves are biblically literate, spiritually discerning, and thus able to guide others into biblical truth. It's here that we see the fulfillment of the needs we noted last week with the "servants" in the church. And, it should be said, the ability to guide or teach others is not limited to the disciple-maker's relationships or interactions with non-believers; it extends equally to those who are in the process of moving through the stages of discipleship. This means: those who have matured through the process of spiritual development are typically the ones best equipped for guiding in both directions.

2. Committed to the mission of "the" church

The second characteristic of disciple-makers is: they are committed to the mission of "the" church. On this point, we need to be careful in a way that's not often done. It's true that nearly all churches will have a stated "mission" or "purpose" for their particular way of doing ministry in their particular city or community. And in many respects, it's good to have such statements because they can help clarify the ways in which individual churches relate to their neighbors. Such statements can also help members understand their potential roles in the church and how to carry them out in good, healthy, God-honoring ways. Or put another way: these kinds of statements provide guidance and direction. And as a Navy SEAL once said: **"Without guidance, workers are little more than a mob. [And a] mob doesn't do quality work."**⁴

But at the same time, these "mission" or "purpose" statements—especially when they are overly defined or specifically focused—have a tendency of pigeon-holing churches into particular acts of service (*or types of ministry or worship*). Thus, churches will only reach and serve a select few of their neighbors—and it's often only the ones they've chosen to reach and serve. (*Not sure I know the verse where Jesus says that's a good idea or what He has in mind*). Moreover, some "mission" or "purpose" statements even have the potential of isolating churches from other like-minded believers, thus hindering the possibility of sharing in the larger responsibility of advancing the gospel message and God's kingdom work. Thus, when I say disciple-makers are those who are committed to the mission of "the" church, I have in mind the much larger picture—the one that Jesus gave His original apostles: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations"** (Mt 28.19). And Paul's entire letter to the Ephesians is an example of one trying to explain what that might look like in action and reality for all believers.

Does this mean that the specific "mission" or "purpose" statements of a disciple-maker's church are irrelevant? Not in the least. It's good for disciple-makers to know and even be committed to the aims and reasons for their particular church's ministry. We certainly cannot have people (*or even leaders*) in a given congregation doing their own thing or going about doing ministry in ways that conflict with how that particular congregation functions as a whole. At the same time, it's good for disciple-makers to know and understand the aims and reasons for the commission given to all churches who seek to honor God and advance the

⁴ Lt. Cmdr. J. Cannon, *Leadership Lessons of Navy SEALs* (McGraw-Hill, 2003), 58.

gospel of Christ's salvation. Thus, disciple-makers know that the full scope of their calling is not limited to a particular congregation; it's meant for the whole world. And any church worth its salt will ensure that its mission moves its people in that direction.

3. "Long obedience in the same direction"

The last characteristic, which follows from the previous one, is a willingness to commit to the "long obedience in the same direction." We've mentioned this before in an earlier sermon, and how this idea comes from the title of a book by Eugene Peterson. This book deals with how we, as steady and patient followers of Christ, can witness to a world that is chaotic and impatient. It emphasizes a biblical implication that discipleship—especially done for the larger mission—requires devotion to the long-haul. Meaning: making disciples of all nations is not going to happen in the next couple of weeks. It takes times. And if we're honest, it takes lifetimes. But it's worth every moment it takes.

Disciple-makers, therefore, know two basic truths about their role and what it takes. First, and as we've already stressed, they know and accept that they will be fighting an uphill battle, simply because our culture's desire for instant gratification—and seeking only those things that provide that pleasure—is at odds with the need for patient endurance in the midst of one's spiritual growth and development. Not to mention its tireless pursuit for obtaining and insisting upon personally-defined truth and good-personness. Or to borrow from Eugene Peterson: our culture is such that "there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."⁵ But disciple-makers are aware of this, and they not only seek to guide others in that journey of apprenticeship but also find creative ways to do so.

The second thing disciple-makers know and accept is that neither the responsibility nor fulfilling it will be an easy task. But, and to put things rather bluntly, they will know and accept that primarily because of their understanding of the nature of the Christian life. To borrow again from Peterson, disciple-makers know that "the Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord, not a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare our blue ribbons and gold medals with those of others who have made it to the winner's circle. To suppose that, or to expect that, is to turn the nut the wrong way."⁶ Or to use the blunt frankness of C.S. Lewis: "If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."⁷ And that is nothing more than a condensed version of biblical truths.

Nowhere in the Bible (*especially the NT*) does it say living for Christ will be easy, trouble-free, or even exempt from criticism, opposition, or persecution. In fact, we're regularly told to expect such things. (*Those who say otherwise are trying to sell something—usually a book—or pandering a cheap theology with a big Texas smile*). And when what we're told to expect to happen happens, we must remember what Jesus told His disciples: "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you." (Jn 15.18–19). Disciple-makers understand this and they

⁵ E. Peterson, *Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (IVP, 2000), 16.

⁶ E. Peterson, *Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (IVP, 2000), 44.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1993), 58.

willingly engage with the world, saying: “My life in Christ and the responsibility I have to fulfill the commission He’s given are not contingent upon my comfort, my popularity, or my self-interest. Rather they are the necessary outworkings of my desire to glorify God alone.”

3. MEETING THE NEEDS

All of that brings us to the final concern for this morning: how to meet the needs of disciple-makers. Admittedly, most of this depends on the individual and their particular giftedness. And that will simply have to be determined on a case-by-case basis, which means a fair amount of patience and discernment. But then again, if our relationships with disciple-makers have been genuine and well-maintained, then that side of the equation sorts itself out. That being said, let me give you four of the more basic (if not “universal”) needs of disciple-makers.

a. They need encouragement and prayer

First: they need encouragement and prayer. (*We all do, really; but especially disciple-makers*). They’re continuously engaged in a heavy responsibility—one that can be utterly taxing on their emotions, physical stamina, thoughts, and even their spirituality. More than that, as Paul says, the responsibility into which disciple-makers (*and all Christians, for that matter*) have been called deals not just with flesh and blood, but especially one that does ongoing battle with “**spiritual forces of evil**” (Eph 6.12). Thus, it’s easy to begin to feel alone and weighed down. And so we must be voices of encouragement for what they do, and reminders that they are not alone in what they do. Moreover, disciple-makers need and deserve our prayers. Prayers for boldness and protection. Prayers for wisdom and insight. Prayers for strength and gentleness. Prayers for tenacity and courage. Prayers for assurance and blessing.

b. They need ongoing “advanced” training

Second: they need ongoing “advanced” training. This simply means: they need to be equipped to know not only how to begin the task of discipleship (*i.e., evangelism*) but also how to carry it out faithfully. Moreover, disciple-makers need confidence in their knowledge of the gospel message and how to defend its truths to those in an ever-increasing skeptical world. Sometimes, to achieve this confidence, such believers need to be taught the deeper things of faith and how to interact (*reasonably and authentically*) with competing worldviews—ones that they will inevitably encounter. We, as a church body, must be ready and able to meet such needs—whether that means we conduct the training ourselves or we recommend other avenues for such training. And there are plenty. And that takes us to the third need...

c. They need mentors

They need mentors, and if they’re worth their salt: they’ll say so. Disciple-makers know they need to learn from those who have served as disciple-makers and who can pass along tips, advice, counsel, support, and encouragement. Because, to be honest, this kind of task is one best learned by those who have been doing it for quite some time. Someone might ask: “**But what happens if a particular congregation does not have mentors who can serve in this way? What if a congregation is made up of newbies and servants?**” One solution is to look beyond a given congregation and seek an “outside” source. And there is nothing wrong with taking this approach. But again, the one who is sought needs to be one who is equipped and able to serve as a mentor to the one desiring to be a disciple-maker. Another solution is to do something like what Paul instructed Titus to do—*i.e.*, to take the time and establish the first

generation of healthy, God-honoring disciple-maker from within a given church, who will then become the mentors for the generations that follow. And finally...building on that approach:

d. They need a servant's heart

Disciple-makers need to have a passion and mindset that reflects the desires of Christ—the one who left His heavenly dwelling with God to dwell in our world, taking on the form of a servant and establishing a true and meaningful and life-changing relationship with us. A relationship that brought with it a newer and better sense of belonging. A relationship that is the definition of truth and authenticity. A relationship that provides answers to our deepest questions—and provides *the* answer to our most difficult and unsolvable problem: sin. A relationship that allows us to experience and know the reality of the gospel's message of salvation in the most personal way imaginable. And it was a relationship that left us forever changed, and part of that change was the desire to reflect the truths of that relationship with others and offer them a chance to have the same. To put it simply, and to alter the imagery just a bit: disciple-makers are the ones who see people sitting on park benches and start up a meaningful and ultimately life-changing relationship with them.