

## Can You Be A Christian Without Being A Disciple?

My subject this morning is about the “elephant in the room” in the American church. This phrase “elephant in the room” has become a common psychological, metaphorical expression that refers an obvious problem that no one wants to address. We all know it is there, but are afraid of bring it up. It is a problem that has drained the life out of the American church.

The elephant is contained in the question that is the title of this message: **“Can you be a Christian Without Being a Disciple?”** Jesus gave His church the marching orders, His mission, we have come to know this as the Great Commission, **“Go and MAKE DISCIPLES of all nations.”** The imperative here that is to be our laser focus against which everything else is measured: MAKE DISCIPLES of mine, Jesus says. That is what I have called you to be about. Do not allow anything to get in the way of this focus.

Yet, we seem to have considerable confusion about what this actually means. This is our elephant. We have essentially said, **“You can be a Christian without actually have to be a disciple.”** Let me illustrate it this way.

A woman came up to her pastor after a morning service. The pastor had apparently challenged the people to be disciples. This did not sit well with her. She said in response, **“Pastor, I just want to be a Christian. I don’t want to be a disciple. I like my life the way it is. I believe that Jesus died for my sins, and I will be with him when I die. Why do I have to be a disciple?”**

This woman [could have just easily been a man] thinks she can be a Christian without being a disciple. She apparently thought there was a **multiple choice exam**: I’ll choose Christian. **What was her definition of a Christian?** For her a Christian is one who believes that Jesus has died for her sins and as a consequence she will be with Jesus when she dies. With her definition of a Christian she saw no reason why she needed to be a disciple.

**Why doesn’t she want to be a disciple?** Whatever she thinks a disciple is...and that is not clear, she thinks it will disturb her way of life. She says, **“I like my life the way it is.”** She will have to make some changes, if she is a disciple. Maybe it’s the Africa thing. So she concludes almost dismissively, **“Why do I have to be a disciple?”** She saw no necessary connection between being a Christian and being a disciple. There are millions like her in the American church.

*How did she come to this conclusion that she could be a Christian without being a disciple?* I would submit that her conclusion is absolutely consistent with the terms in which we have been preaching the gospel. In other words, she drew this conclusion not in spite of the gospel we have been preaching, but precisely because of it.

What are the usual terms in which we share the good news?

I call it the **transactional** gospel, because we so often communicate the gospel in **accounting** terms.

1. Because of our sin an eternal debit has been registered on our account that we cannot possibly pay off ourselves.

2. But the good news is that God sent his Son Jesus to cancel this debt: Jesus paid our debt on the cross.

3. Jesus rose from the dead as a demonstration that this debt was paid and that death had been defeated.

4. Now the transaction: ***If we put our faith in Jesus Christ then His credit is transferred to our account and it blots out our debt.***

5. We are then handed a receipt marked **PAID IN FULL**.

Forgiveness of sin is the gospel. You are good to go.

You might say, **“Well that sounds like good news to me.”** I call it getting in on the **benefits plan**. It is all about what we get from God.

John Ortberg, Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, says that we have been preaching the gospel of the minimum requirements to get into heaven when we die.

Dallas Willard had dubbed this **“bar-code Christianity”**. We want to make sure we get the salvation “bar-code”, so that we can be rung up by God’s eternal scanner in the sky.

We can summarize the current terms of the gospel in four points like this:

- *God loves you:*
- *You messed up:*
- *Jesus died for you:*
- *Accept the gift of God’s forgiveness:*

The decision question in a popular presentation of the gospel is: **“Will you receive Jesus Christ right now and trust him alone for forgiveness of sins and eternal life?”** If the person says yes, we follow it with the sinner’s prayer: **“Dear Jesus, thank you for making it possible for me to find peace with God! I believe that when you died you were paying the penalty for my sins. I now receive you into my life as**

Savior, so I can have forgiveness and never-ending life with God! Thanks for the gift of eternal life.”

So it is any wonder why this woman thinks she can be a Christian without being a disciple. She asks somewhat incredulously: **why do I have to be a disciple?** I have gotten all the benefits promised.

We have been preaching a **non-discipleship gospel** that has led to people believing that there are two categories possible: You can be a Christian or be a disciple. You can make the choice. This woman chose to be a Christian without being a disciple.

But we might ask the question, is this the gospel Jesus’ proclaimed or just a watered down version of justification by faith alone? What was the gospel Jesus proclaimed that led to being a disciple, not just a Christian as commonly understood.

### **Let’s turn to the gospel of Mark 1:14-15**

The Gospel of Mark gives us the most succinct summary of Jesus’ message. In outline, almost bullet point form, we are told Jesus’ gospel from the very beginning of his ministry. “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming *the good news of God*. (Hear the trumpets, don’t miss the message!) “The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe *the good news*” (Mark 1:14-15). Is Jesus’ gospel our gospel?

Jesus’ message was *the good news*. We all like good news, don’t we? I think my wife had one of the hardest professions in the world. She was an elementary school principal for 16 years. She loved the kids, had to keep the parents happy, and nurture the faculty. Very demanding every day. Never a moment’s quiet. So at the end of the day, she needed to take a little nap before dinner. I was under strict instructions not to interrupt her as she slept on the couch. The only exception was if I came home with some “good news.” Then I could quietly slip up alongside the couch and whisper, “Honey, I have some good news.” I would watch her eyes slowly open, and her head turn in my direction in order to hear the good news. We all want good news.

Interesting enough Jesus’ proclamation of good news also had four points:

- The time has come
- The Kingdom of God is near
- Repent
- Believe the good news

Each phrase is packed with substance.

## The Time Has Come or Fulfilled

Eugene Peterson's captures the moment simply, "Time's up!"<sup>1</sup> This phrase conjures up the image of a pregnant woman who is closing in on the end of the nine-month waiting period. The culmination commences with birth pangs. Finally, the contractions are five minutes apart. She announces to her husband, "It's time! Call the doctor! Let's go." The hour has arrived; the waiting is over.

So when Jesus is saying "the time has come..." he ties the gospel story back to the entire story of Israel and views himself at its completion. There are two words for time in the Greek language in which the NT was written. When we say, "what time it is?" We are referring to *chronos*, or what we might call tic-toc time. One moment is no different than the next. It is just a marker on the clock. In contrast Jesus chooses the word, *kairos*, which is opportunity time, a defining moment whose importance is not to be missed. It is time pregnant with significance because of what has happened on a particular day or moment. As Americans celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup> as Independence Day marking the birth of a nation. This is our *kairos* moment? What is the significance July 5<sup>th</sup>? Just another day (unless it is *your* birthday). *Kairos* says that everything will be different from this day forward. With Jesus' coming a *kairos* event has occurred.

## The Kingdom of God Is Near

**What is so earth shattering, Jesus?** I will tell you what, "*The kingdom of God is at hand or has come among you?*" Jesus comes on the scene announcing the theme of his ministry as the proclamation of the "kingdom of God" and spends his last moments on earth following his death and resurrection speaking to his disciples "about the kingdom of God". (Acts 1:3). In between there are 122 references to the Kingdom of God or heaven with over 90 of these being on the lips of Jesus. In other words, the setting for Jesus' gospel is the kingdom of God. Oh, how different this is from the ***transactional*** gospel!

When Jesus came announcing the near presence of the kingdom of God, this would have stirred up images that were popular in Jesus' day. The Hebrew people had been longing for their promised **Deliverer or Messiah (*Christos*)** who would usher in the **Kingdom of God**. One of the things that marked the difference between The Chosen People and all others was their view of history. The Jewish people actually believed history was going somewhere; it had a destination, as opposed to meaningless repetitious cycles (summer, fall, winter, spring, endlessly; birth, life, death, rebirth, endlessly) of pagan cultures. The people of Israel believed in a Sovereign God who divided time into two major eras: *this age* followed by *the age to come*. (1) *This age* was torn asunder by sin and all its consequences, one of which was a shameful dominance by a foreign oppressor (at that time Rome). (2) But all of this would be supplanted by the inbreaking of *the age to come (the kingdom of God)*.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Message*, Eugene Peterson

What would they have heard Jesus saying? The *age to come* had come with Jesus. The eternal reign of God has come on earth. The future had broken into the present. All sin would be forgiven. The lion would lie down with the lamb. Swords would be beaten into plowshares. We will make war no more. A King like David would reestablish the glory days of Israel FOREVER. The national shame had ended. What a surge of hope! No wonder they wanted to make Jesus the King.

They would have been partially right. Jesus, the King, was among them. But He was bringing in a very different kind of kingdom than was anticipated. *How strangely king Jesus wields his power.* **The kingdoms of men have symbols of power like palaces and armies, yet King Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. Human kings rule over their realm on thrones, while King Jesus is lifted up on a cross.**

So when Jesus announces the presence of the kingdom or that the Kingdom of God was among them, He was saying that He was the vanguard of an invading force. His kingdom was coming alongside pushing back the darkness. On June 6, 1944 the Allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy. Once there was a foothold they could steadily take territory from the enemy. It took 11 months from D-Day to V-E Day, May 8, 1945. We live between D-day and V-E day. We live at the time between the times, the already but the not yet. The kingdom is present but still not complete.

Jesus came with the kingdom to set up a “contrast society.” As the suffering servant he would rule a kingdom of love and grace that was counter to the darkness of this world. If you wanted the benefits of the kingdom—like forgiveness and life forever with the King—you had to change kingdoms. Paul writes, “**He has delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son...**” (Col. 1:13). To get the benefits you must come under a new rule. It is only as we are in the kingdom of His beloved Son that “**we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.**”

Jesus was constantly creating pictures of what the new life in this kingdom of love and grace looked like. Jesus’ ministry on earth demonstrated *the contours of life in His Kingdom*. For example, James and John approached Jesus on the sly with a request to sit on his right and left hand when he came into His kingdom. What was their notion of the kingdom that Jesus would establish? It was based upon the prevailing view that the Messiah would usher in heaven on earth. Their view of self-importance and personal value meant that they wanted to be as close to the center of power as possible. “**Look at us; see where we sit!**”, they wanted people to say. Then Jesus proceeds to flip their view of power and worth on its head. What Jesus is saying to James and John is that you have been captured by the world’s view of power and worth, not mine. “**You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you...**” (Mark 10:42-43). If you want to be great in Jesus’ kingdom kneeling

before others will be the appropriate posture. The King never expects of His followers what He has not already modeled, giving “his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). This is only one instance of many, where Jesus describes the way of life in His kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Sermon on the Mount is the discipleship manual of the New Testament.

We often recite the Lord’s Prayer without comprehension of the radical words we are praying. We pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Where should we expect to see the kingdom of God breaking through the kingdom of darkness? Where are the outposts of the kingdom? Where are the kingdom strongholds? Where are those 1000 points of light? If we should expect it anywhere, it would be the church, the body of Jesus Christ. This is place where Jesus exercises his rule. For it is the people who are his disciples who are being “taught to obey all that Jesus commanded.” We are to be the ones under authority.

One night at our small group, Phil perfectly illustrated being a man under authority. He is a man who enjoys a glass of wine or two at the end of a day. In my book this is an area of Christian liberty, so there is nothing wrong with this per se. But he noticed his wife was evidencing some agitation over this. It made sense that she was very sensitive about this because of alcoholism in her family. So Phil decided to have a conversation with the Holy Spirit about his wife’s agitation. The Spirit said to Phil, “She is afraid.” So to assuage his wife’s fears he stopped drinking alcohol. He related this story 3 months after he had had this epiphany from the Spirit. He had not had a drink at least in her presence since. The point of the story is not whether or not imbibing alcohol is right or wrong, but if you are in the kingdom of God you seek the guidance of the King. When the King speaks through His Spirit, you do what the Spirit says.

Kingdom people are under new management.

## Repent

What is the entryway into the Kingdom of God? Jesus is saying, “Here comes the kingdom of God, *repent and believe the good news.*” King Jesus plants himself in the road in front of us. I visualize Jesus waving his hands and shouting at us, “Stop, don’t go any further. Danger. If you keep going this way you will head into an abyss.”

Repentance is Jesus’ exclamation point. “Time’s Up! Wake Up!” It is as if Jesus is saying, “Quit sleep walking through life!” It is a jarring word and meant to be so.

Repentance literally means, “Rethink your thinking!” The way you are thinking is leading you in the wrong direction because the kingdom of darkness in

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5-7 known as the Sermon on the Mount has been called “The Discipleship Manual”. It is Jesus’ most succinct description of the lifestyle in the kingdom of God.

which you are currently dwelling has shaped your thinking. You are now entering a “contrast society”. The kingdom of God is based upon an entirely different set of values. Jesus says, **“My kingdom will turn you right side up in an upside-down world.”**

To repent then is to begin to lay aside ways of thinking, habits patterns, goals, ambitions, etc. that are based upon entirely on worldly set of assumptions.

When the kingdom comes crashing into our life there is a revolution that takes place. Almost every Wednesday morning you will find me at Soledad prison about 25 minutes south from here. One of the main reasons I love being there is that I get to see radically transformed lives through repentance.

David was a skinhead, a white supremacist. He has tattoos that engulf his body up to the base of his neck. Written across the knuckles of his right hand are the letters h-a-t-e. The man I meet today comes into the chapel with a joyful bounce in his step. He is a lover of every shade of the brethren we find in the Christian community. He says on the one hand he would love to be able remove these tattoos from his body, but they are also a reminder to him of the life he was saved from.

Mark was a human trafficker. He sold women into sexual slavery. When you meet him today, he is one of the gentlest persons you ever have meet. He makes no bones about the vile person he was once. But now he has an insatiable desire for the word of God. When Mark is before me, I stand disbelief that he could ever been the person he said he was. He is such a changed individual.

To be in the kingdom is to make repentance a constant way of life. It is not a one-time event. I prayed the sinner’s prayer I am good to go. I often begin my time of prayer with Psalm 139:23-24: **“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”** C. S. Lewis notes, **“The true Christian nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.”** A disciple of Jesus knows that there is a lifetime of work to drain the cesspools of our heart, which takes constant vigilance.

### **Believe the Good News**

Believe the good news. We walk through the door of repentance into God’s eternal kingdom, and then dwell in the land of lavish grace. Even though we are in touch with **“the wrong that seems so oft so strong”**, the good news is that we have been **“transferred to the Kingdom of His beloved Son.”** We are the adopted sons and daughters of the King. We are the beloved of God. We hear the same words that were spoken to Jesus by the Father as if they are spoken to us as well, **“You are my child, marked and chosen by my love the delight or pride of my life.”**

This is the kingdom that penetrates the darkness is marked by the radical grace of God. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves; it has all been done for

us. Believe the good news means, “Live in, luxuriate in, wallow in...your new identity as a child of the King.” There is nothing that can snatch you out of the Father’s hand. You and I are secure forever. No matter how much draining of the cesspool of our hearts there is still to do, we do it from the standpoint that we have unshakeable acceptance in the heart of God. I can’t improve on the way the Apostle Paul puts this good news in Ephesians 1:4-6 (The Message): “Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.”

This is the good news of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed.

## Conclusion

So let’s go back to our original question: Can you be a Christian without being a disciple? Can we possibly say what this woman said, “I just want to be a Christian. I don’t want to be a disciple?” I just want all the benefits without the cost of commitment. The question almost sounds absurd after we hear the true gospel, doesn’t it? In the New Testament the word Christian only appears three times. It probably was a derisive nickname given by outsiders as a way to identify those of the Christ party, almost like a sect or a political party. Even with that there is no room or a sliver of difference between Christian and disciple. In Acts 11:26, “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.” No you can’t be a Christian without being a disciple. We have made up a category that doesn’t exist in the Bible. On the other hand, the word disciple(s) is used 268. The New Testament is a book about disciples who have adopted a way of life that is all encompassing.

Let me bring this home.

If we want to be disciples we need to ask, how did Jesus make disciples? He went about preaching, teaching and healing for sure. But he did not make disciples in crowds. I like to say that if we could have made disciples by preaching at people the job would have been done a long time ago. To make my point, not even the best preacher would ever existed thought his could make disciples in crowds.

He had a band of 12 with whom he shared close association. He taught them in the context of real life, like the incident with James and John. Within the 12 he had a smaller group of three, Peter, James and John with whom he shared significant moments.

What was Jesus’ goal with the disciples? To get them ready to carry on and assume his ministry when He returned to the Father. He made disciples who could make disciples.

Jesus grew his disciples in a small band and trained them to do the same with others. This should be our model as well. I have found that the most transformative environment in a group of 3 or 4 I call *micro groups*. Here we share our lives transparently, bringing the word of God to the real places we live: into our roles as husband or wife, parent, child, employee or employer; citizen or servant in the community. A friend of mine says of himself, “I am a disciple of Jesus, disguised as a furniture salesman.”

In these *micro groups* we act as each other’s cheerleaders. So we believe that we will only grow to become what God wants us to be, if we make it a priority to be with others, open God’s word together, apply it to our life, share the vulnerable and sensitive areas, support each other through difficult times, and even get to the point of confessing our sin to another.

How does your life show that you are serious about being Christ’s disciple? Paul says, “Your life is not your own, you were bought with a price” (I Corinthians 6:19-20). So what is your proof of purchase? Does your schedule demonstrate that being face to face with other fellow disciples is your priority?

And that is not all, you are in the process being equipped not only to be our Lord’s disciple, but to make disciples. Remember the mission? “Go and MAKE DISCIPLES”! Disciples are reproducing disciplemakers, not end users. If the entire Christian church had the attitude of the woman referenced, the church would not last one generation. William Barclay has said, “Every Christian must see themselves as a link to the next generation.” If it depended upon us, would there even be a next generation of followers of Jesus?

The church exists for no other purpose that to make followers of Jesus who make followers of Jesus.

Let me close with this challenge. Let me take you back to the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. The time had come for the 4 by 100 meter relay race. There was great expectation, because US team was the class of the field. There was no question as to who would win, but just whether we would break the world record. So all eyes were on the clock when the gun sounded. The first American runner burst out of the starting block like a shot and smoothly passed the baton to the second runner. The crowd seemed to rise in volume with each pass as they saw that the American team was ahead of the world record pace. As the second runner passed the baton to the third, the buzz continued to build. By now the outcome of the race was not in doubt as the gap was visible. The 3<sup>rd</sup> runner was bringing it to the anchor when it appeared they were having difficult making the handoff. In an instant, the air was sucked out of the crowd as the baton landed on track. The race was over for the American team. Disqualified.

So my challenge to you is, “Don’t drop the baton!”