

## OUTCOMES OF DISCIPLESHIP: DESCRIBING FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Two weeks ago we used the illustration of a lawn sprinkler factory when we revisited our mission: *to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ*. We imagined a factory that bought production equipment, hired and trained workers, invested in corporate infrastructure, but never actually produced any sprinklers.

A company like that might generate a lot of activity, but it is just fooling itself if it is not producing what it is in business to produce.

In the same way, we said, we are just fooling ourselves if we do everything we do as a church family without being intentional about fulfilling our mission: actually helping each other become fully devoted, following followers of Jesus. That's our primary business: winning people to faith in Jesus and discipling them into spiritual maturity, "...to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Clearly articulating our mission determines how we define success, how we evaluate outcomes. We define success, for instance, not so much by how many show up, but by how many grow up.

Knowing our mission is fundamental. But we also have to have some sense of what a fully devoted follower of Jesus looks like. For instance, a sprinkler company must design its product. Will it be an impulse sprinkler, a rotary sprinkler, a fan sprinkler, or some other design? Will it be made from machined metal, molded plastic, or a combination of materials. What will this thing look like?

As the Elders revisited our core statements this summer, we took a fresh look at how we have described fully devoted followers of Jesus. We have said that a maturing follower of Jesus is: a believer, Spirit-filled, growing, disciplined, connected, a witness, a steward, and faithful to his or her family responsibilities. We further developed a brief description clarifying what each of those eight characteristics look like. These have defined the outcomes we seek in the discipleship process.

As a result of our conversations over the summer, we have sharpened those definitions and added two more. We're trying to describe what we're after in all of our ministries here. These become yardsticks by which we can measure how we're doing. Across the board, from the cradle to the grave, are we helping our church family make progress in Christ-formation: introducing people to Jesus and reproducing in them the character of Jesus, until we all come to "...the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

It begins with conversion. Fully devoted followers of Jesus start their journey by personal faith in Jesus. They become believers:

- *Believers: They have sincerely repented of their sin, put their trust in Jesus and his death, burial and resurrection, and have publicly declared their faith by being baptized.*

*We take the Bible seriously*—that's one of our core values. So when we describe what it means to be a believer, we take our cues from Scripture. When Peter preached the very first gospel sermon,

the message was this: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Later Paul described conversion this way: “...if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:9).

Becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus involves three things: repentance, faith and baptism. It begins with repentance.

Repentance is a word that is significantly undervalued in today’s world. It’s reputation has been tarnished by cynical caricatures of bad revival meetings. Repentance is put in the mouths of angry preachers who call emotionally manipulated crowds to feel endangered by the impending wrath of God. Repentance becomes a frenzy, not a response.

It’s too bad, because the Bible describes repentance as a turn towards sanity. It’s a human response to God’s wake-up call. Repentance is the internal shift that takes place when we finally see God with a measure of clarity and come to our senses about our sin and guilt. We acknowledge that like little puppet dictators, we have tried to run our own lives, and we have made a mess of things. We have resisted God’s authority and broken God’s laws. Repentance acknowledges that God is right, we are wrong. It brings us to the cross of Jesus and prepares us to believe the good news that is the gospel.

Repentance opens our hearts to faith in Jesus. God’s good news is that Jesus has taken care of our rebellion and sin. Our guilt disqualifies us from heaven and alienates us from God. Left to ourselves, we would be condemned to spend eternity away from God’s presence. The Bible says that those who die in their sins will be: “...punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:6).

When Jesus died on the cross, God the Son paid in full the entire debt of guilt owed by every human on this planet. Jesus took our place. He received in his own body the condemnation and punishment we deserved.

After he died, he was buried in a sealed tomb. But three days later he rose from that tomb, breaking death’s stranglehold on humanity. Because of his death and resurrection, Jesus offers forgiveness and life to all who believe in him.

Believers are not people who have a generic belief in God, go to church and try to be good. Believers are people who have come to terms with the reality that they are not good. They have repented of their sin and put their trust completely in Jesus, receiving by personal faith his offer of pardon and reconciliation with the Father.

And then they get baptized. Baptism is how Jesus commanded us to go public with our faith. Baptism doesn’t save us. It is the enacted witness of those who have been saved by faith in Jesus, declaring to all the world that Jesus Christ is LORD, and he is their LORD personally.

The New Testament knows nothing of an un-baptized Christ-follower. It’s an oxymoron. Fully devoted followers of Jesus publically declare their identity with Jesus by being baptized. It’s their first obedience to their Savior.

We do not assume that because someone is in church, he or she is a believer. That’s like assuming that because a thing is in a garage it must be a car. Authentic believers have repented of their sins, entrusted themselves to Jesus and his gospel, and publically declared their faith in Jesus through baptism.

Fully-devoted followers of Jesus are also:

- *Spirit-filled: They yield to the Spirit. They live by the Spirit. They keep step with the Spirit. The Spirit's presence is obvious in their lives, making them fruitful by empowering them for service and transforming their character.*

The Bible describes believers as people whose very bodies have become holy temples in which God lives by his Spirit. We have a whole new dynamic in our lives. Think of it. The Spirit of our Creator, our Rescuer, our Sovereign, has taken up residence in us and wants to demonstrate his presence through us. The Bible says the Holy Spirit actually writes God's laws upon our hearts—he internalizes God's ways so that we live our faith from the inside out.

Turn with me to Galatians 5:16-25. Let's read these verses carefully.

God's Spirit in us sets itself against those sinful desires that emerge out of the worst parts of our own selves—what the Bible calls of sinful nature. The Spirit enables us to say “No!” to those evil impulses that are so strongly compelling to us.

What's more, the Spirit encourages and enables us to act like Jesus. That's what the fruit of the Spirit describes. When we walk in the Spirit and let the Spirit lead us, when we submit to what he directs us to do in the Scriptures, something wonderful and good shows up in our lives. The life of the Spirit shows up in our attitudes, our values, our responses and our conduct. That's fruit. It's what the Spirit produces in us when we keep step with him on a daily basis.

Fully devoted followers of Jesus demonstrate the transforming influence of God's Holy Spirit living inside them.

The next trait of fully devoted followers is something we've added. It's already present in the fruit of the Spirit, but Jesus sets it apart in such a way that it deserves it's own category. Fully devoted followers of Jesus are:

- *Loving: As loved people, they are loving people.*

Jesus said: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Love is *the* foundational ethic of the Kingdom. It is fundamental to life in the church. It is the chief mark of a believer. It's persistent absence is *prima facie* evidence that one may not be a believer at all, at least, not a *following* follower of Jesus.

The Apostle John echoed Jesus when he wrote: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. . . . We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:9-11; 19-21).

Fully devoted followers of Jesus grow deeper into the love they first encountered when they became believers. They are staggered by the fact that God didn't wait for us to clean up our lives. His great love *initiated* a rescue. He sent his Son, Jesus into the world to become an atoning sacrifice on the cross—the means by which our sins could be forgiven, our moral debt to God's law paid, and the wrath of God set aside.

We didn't love God. God loved us. We are loved people, and loved people love people. Having tasted a love we never knew existed, Christ-followers want to share it with others. Fully devoted followers of Jesus love God and they love others.

These are the first of ten characteristics we believe describe fully devoted followers of Jesus. It's not a perfect list, and other church families might wish to emphasize other descriptors. But these help us sharpen the focus of our mission. We want to grow into loving, Spirit-filled believers who follow Jesus. This is what our "sprinkler" looks like.

We want our seniors, those who have experienced a lifetime with Jesus, to reflect the mature fruit of the Spirit's long work in their lives. We want to challenge our children and young people to faith in Jesus, life in the Spirit, and authentic love that stretches them—to look and act like Jesus might have when he was five, or nine, or sixteen. And we want everyone in-between to be in the hunt: loving, Spirit-filled believers who follow Jesus in loving obedience.

It's difficult to measure growth. Early last June I smacked my thumb with a hammer installing flooring at James and Ashley's new house. It pretty much hurt. All summer this bruised nail has been growing out. New, healthy nail is now about forty percent up my thumb.

I look at it every day and the progress is imperceptible—until I take a long look and remember when that black spot filled the bottom of the nail.

Spiritual growth is usually much the same. It is sometimes, but rarely dramatic. It takes the perspective of months and years to identify significant transformation, and then only if we have pursued life in the Spirit after coming to faith in Jesus. It is that long obedience in the same direction.

It is most pronounced when we first believe, and God cleans up some of our major messes and bad habits. And then it is that gradual, patient commitment of God to make us like Jesus.

May you grow in grace and measure spiritual success over the long haul. And may all of us grow deeper as loving, Spirit-filled believers in Jesus.