

Chapter Thirteen - Make Disciples

Imagine giving a child a bucket and commanding them to empty the ocean. It's a ridiculous request and way beyond the realms of possibility. But if the child is young enough they'll get started with a joyful enthusiasm and give it a go. But that won't last long. They'll soon get tired and realise that the work is futile. And give up.

Jesus gives a command to his disciples that sounds equally improbable. The sheer scale of what Jesus demands is breathtaking in its scope. Jesus is about to leave the earth and return to heaven. He is standing on a mountain with his disciples. There are only eleven of them left, and they are still psychologically reeling from watching their friend be arrested, crucified, and now be alive again. Some are doubting, most are confused, some are worshipping. Hardly the sort who can change the world. But Jesus looks at this unlikely bunch and says:

Go and make disciples of all nations. (Matthew 28 v 19)

The sheer enormity of the command is staggering. He isn't asking them to simply go to their family, or village or even their country. He is talking about nations that they don't even know exist. By any stretch of the imagination this is not possible. But this is the plan. And it has always been the plan. Right from the beginning God's intention was to bring his blessing to the whole world. All of it.

Jesus understands that plan and so he issues the command.

Really?

Have you ever tried to imagine being one of the eleven standing on that mountain and hearing this command? Thomas is still struggling to come to terms with the fact that Jesus is really alive again (John 20 v 24-29) and now he is being commanded to go and make disciples of all the nations.

They all must have felt completely overwhelmed. They aren't just being thrown in the deep end—they are being thrown into an end that probably has no bottom at all. These are just ordinary men who have lived their ordinary lives and have barely stepped outside the border of Israel. Now they are being told to think about all the nations. It's a good job they had no access to Google Earth or they really would have freaked out.

Jesus knows all of this and yet he still issues the command.

Daunted

That command continues to ring out to this day. Down through the centuries Jesus commands his followers to:

Go and make disciples of all nations.

When I hear that from the lips of Jesus, I feel just as weak and overwhelmed as the first eleven disciples standing on the mountain. I'm daunted as I look at the sheer numbers of people who have never heard about Jesus in our world. In fact, come to that, I'm daunted by the number of people who live on my street. The task feels too big.

Some of the commands we've looked at feel logically impossible. Commands such as "Rejoice in the Lord always" (chapter 5) or "Be perfect" (chapter 6). *Of course that's not possible*, we think. Then there are some commands that we think may be possible for some (particularly godly) Christians, but we act as though they are impossible for us. The command to make disciples can fall into that category. *Some people are really good at doing that*, we think, *but not me*.

Added to that I have another problem.

Often I don't feel very excited about the task of making disciples. I know I'm supposed to be doing it but I find it is really hard to speak about Jesus to my friends. I feel constantly guilty that I should be doing more. And even if I manage to reach one or two, it is hardly reaching "the nations". It can seem fairly futile and pointless. Like emptying the ocean with a bucket...

I think lots of Christians find themselves in a similar situation and the guilt goes on increasing.

We think we must have gone wrong somewhere. Is it really supposed to feel like such a burden?

Let's go back a bit

The last command Jesus gave his disciples was to GO. But what was the first command Jesus gives them in Matthew's Gospel?

Come follow me ... and I will send you out to fish for people. (Matthew 4 v 19)

His final command was to GO. But his first command was to COME.

This is essential for us to understand if we are ever going to be the joyful disciple-makers that Jesus is calling us to be. The relationship that exists between coming to Jesus and going out from Jesus is critical. The plan to reach the nations does not rest on *our* shoulders but on *his*. It isn't me and my bucket. It is Jesus and his great power. And that changes everything. So let's get clear on what Jesus came to do.

Fishing

Jesus came to earth to go fishing. But he wasn't interested in fish. No, he was passionately interested in people. Normally, fishing is a fairly non-confrontational pastime (unless you're a fish). But Jesus came on a very different type of fishing mission. His was highly confrontational.

As Jesus walks onto the pages of human history, the Kingdom of Heaven invades the Kingdom of earth. The Bible is the story of these two kingdoms. God is the rightful King but humanity chose to reject his rule and establish their own kingdom on earth. As a result heaven and earth were divided. Light and darkness. Life and death. Two Kingdoms separated by a vast chasm.

But in the coming of Jesus, heaven invades earth. The rightful King comes to establish his rightful Kingdom. Make no mistake—that is an act of war. A beautiful act of liberation.

So, Jesus came to fish for people and to transfer them by the net-load from the Kingdom of death and darkness to the Kingdom of light and life.

There has never been another fisherman like Jesus. He is gathering a people, a vast netful of people to live forever with him in his kingdom. This is what Jesus means when he talks about disciple-making. It starts here. It is fishing. Of a Kingdom-clashing nature.

Come and join me

So when Jesus calls his first disciples to come to him, he is calling them leave the Kingdom of this world and to become part of the Kingdom of Heaven. He is calling them to come and join in this great mission. Jesus clearly thinks that being involved in this mission is a great, great privilege.

That is why he doesn't bury disciple-making somewhere deep in the small print of following him. Rather he starts with that as the number one reason why his disciples should come and follow him. It is so striking.

I think if I was trying to persuade people to leave their livelihoods and their homes then I would think long and hard about what I was offering. I would want to make sure that they could see all the benefits that were in store for them. So we might expect Jesus to say, "Come follow me and I will... forgive your sin. Or I will... give you life. Or I will... take you to heaven". But instead Jesus says,

Come follow me ... and I will send you out to fish for people.

In the way that Jesus sees the world, disciple-making is not the downside of being a Christian; it is the great privilege. Perhaps we need to ask God to change our perspective on evangelism...

So when Jesus issues the command to "go and make disciples" it is wrapped up with great statements about the nature of Jesus.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (Matthew 28 v 18)

Jesus is the rightful King. We do not need to feel as if we are trying to persuade people to join a club, or change their lifestyle a bit. We are calling people to leave one kingdom and be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. It could not be more significant.

Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28 v 20)

Jesus hasn't finished his fishing trip. He still fishes today. As we engage in making disciples, we know that Jesus is with us, equipping us and fishing through us.

This is a privilege.

But it doesn't always feel that way.

When "go" is a burden

So much of the activism in our world is fuelled by the relentless call to GO. Whether it be in the realm of religion, or politics, or the pursuit of social justice, the cry all around us is the same. Rise up. Go! Go! Go! Be a generation that makes a difference. Go and change the world.

The trouble is that the responsibility is placed entirely on *your* shoulders and that is a heavy burden to bear.

This struck me recently when I was putting some rubbish in our kitchen bin. One of my children rushed at me with a look of real anger on his face. He (fairly strongly) informed me that this particular item of rubbish could be recycled and that we had to "save the planet".

Now please don't misunderstand, I am all for recycling. But I do remember thinking to myself that saving the planet is quite a big burden for my eight-year-old to carry on his little shoulders.

So many people live their lives under a crushing burden of expectation.

Jesus' commands aren't supposed to feel like this. That is why it's essential to understand that *before* Jesus commanded his disciples to GO he *first* commanded them to COME.

Come to me

There is a relationship to be cultivated, there is a King to be followed, there is a rest to be found, before we ever run off to get on with obeying. Jesus is not raising an army of activists. He is calling an army of disciples who will delight to follow him.

You see exactly the same thing in Matthew 11:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11 v 28-30)

Jesus is contrasting himself to the religious leaders of the day. They loaded people up with heavy burdens that they could not carry and then refused to lift a finger to help them. They told people to Go and do. The result was that people were left defeated and crushed. Jesus hated that attitude.

So it would be extremely strange, and frankly wrong, to imagine that as Jesus left this earth his final command was designed to burden his disciples with a crushing weight that they had to carry. There must be more going on.

The reason that we come to him is that his shoulders are broad enough to carry the burden. He is able to take responsibility. The task that is impossible for *us* is absolutely possible for *him*.

It is all very well in principle, but how do we begin to make this our experience in disciple making?

Fishing

I am not a great fisherman. In fact I've only done it a couple of times. My first experience was mackerel fishing on a two-hour boat trip when I was young. There were three phases to my experience of fishing. The first stage was ENTHUSIASM. I had to make the little feather dance around and I bounced the rod with all my might. I was absolutely sure I was going to catch something and reeled it up with great regularity to see if there was anything there. Phase one was fun. But it soon led to what I unimaginatively call phase two. This is the DEFLATION phase. The optimism and energy disappear and I began to lose heart. I was still going through the motions and moving the rod but all expectation and joy was gone. I looked at my watch a lot. I wondered if I could stop soon. Then I noticed my mum's bag had food in it. What was the point of fishing when we already had food in the boat? I don't even like fish and mum had Frazzles (bacon-flavoured snacks) in her bag. This was Phase three which I would summarise as FRAZZLED. I pulled in the rod. I stopped fishing. I ate Frazzles.

I think fishing for people follows a similar pattern. We might start out enthusiastic at the idea of calling people to follow King Jesus. We are expectant and joyful. But it can soon lead to deflation. We still try and talk about Jesus. We still invite people to church. But the joy has gone. And others of us find ourselves in the frazzled phase. We have given up even trying anymore.

Is it inevitable that we will end up deflated or frazzled? Is the command to make disciples of all nations simply far too ambitious? Let's take the four steps we have been using and see what happens when we apply them to this command.

I CAN'T

Be honest about how you feel about the idea of making disciples. Does it terrify you? Or burden you? Or excite you? Or daunt you? Take a minute to look at what is in your own heart.

Is it possible that you once were enthusiastic but can see that slipping away? Perhaps you find that you don't really have any desire to make disciples of Jesus. You find it hard to care that people belong to the Kingdom of Earth and not the Kingdom of Heaven. They seem to be fairly happy and you don't see the problem. It might even be that you have lost sight of the fact that belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven is really that great. You might even find yourself looking at people living without Jesus and envying them for the lives that they have.

Sometimes we can begin to withdraw from people who don't know Jesus and just spend time with other Christians. We have a nagging sense of guilt that we should be doing more evangelism but

just can't seem to get started. It might be that we feel really scared and nervous of speaking about Jesus. We are more scared of what people think of us than what Jesus commands us.

Do you find any of those things lurking in your heart? We need to tackle these attitudes first before we then start rushing off to try and obey. We will never be able to fish like Jesus until we face up to the wrong in our hearts.

I'M SORRY

Now take the time to say sorry for the things you discovered in your heart. Are there specific ways that you have avoided disciple-making? When we feel guilty, we're not supposed to just store that up and try use guilt to motivate us to action. Guilt is only good if it drives us to Jesus to find forgiveness.

So take all of the guilt you feel in this area of evangelism and run to Jesus with it. Remember, that is exactly what he calls us to. He calls us to *come* to him.

He knows your fear and failures and weaknesses. And he did not come to condemn you but to forgive you.

Our wrong attitudes are serious but are completely dealt with at the cross. Jesus does not just lift a finger to help us. He lifted a wooden cross on his shoulders to bear the burden of our failures away.

So come to him now and confess your sin. Find forgiveness.

PLEASE HELP

Now begin to pray for a change of perspective. Jesus thinks that fishing for people is a privilege, so pray that the Holy Spirit would help you to see things in a new way.

Keep asking God to open your eyes to see the kingdom of heaven as glorious. Keep asking God for compassion as you look at the people around us. This is different to us beating ourselves up and feeling guilty. It is about a change of heart.

Sometimes I feel relief when I speak to someone about Jesus because it means I've done a bit of evangelism and don't need to feel guilty for a few days. Do you sometimes feel like that? Instead, let's ask God's Holy Spirit to change our hearts so that we will *want* to make disciples.

Ask for help with the specific concerns you have. Whether that is fear or inadequacy or not knowing where to start or whatever it might be. Ask God to deal with those specific barriers to evangelism and for his power to change you.

LET'S GO

Now begin to think about how to make progress in disciple-making. Here are some specific ideas:

Start praying for some friends by name. That would be a great start.

Get yourself prepared. Choose something from the Bible that has been helpful to you and think about how you would mention it to a friend. Perhaps it is a verse that has helped you recently, or a sermon, or a story that Jesus told. If a chance to speak about Jesus came along, why would you say that he is good news?

Then pray for an opportunity to have a go. It is much easier to speak if we have thought about it beforehand. Tell people what God has been teaching you from the Bible. It may be something you have read or something you heard in church. Invite people to come to church with you. Find a way

for your friends who don't know Jesus to spend time with your friends who do. Have a BBQ and invite people over. Just try some different things, pray, and see what happens.

If you know people in your church who are good at this, then ask them to help you. Ask them for some advice. Ask them to pray with you. Sometimes the accountability of knowing that someone else is praying can be an enormous help.

And don't just have a small horizon. How could you get involved in mission to the ends of the earth? Are there missionaries that you could go and visit on your summer holiday? Are there people that you could support both with prayers and finances? Might it even be that as you *come* to Jesus, he would equip and send you to *go* to the ends of the earth? There is joy and privilege in this command. What practical steps could you take to move forward?

And when you fail, don't be frazzled. Instead, return to Jesus. Confess. Ask for help and then go again.