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Series: Vision 2022 – *Building Up the Body of Christ*

Title: *Building Up the Body of Christ Through Discipleship*

Text: Matthew 4:18-22; Matthew 16:24-25; Philippians 2:12-16

Preacher: Mark Adams

God has done amazing things here at Redland in this pandemic, but I think we would all agree that these past 23 months have been tough. The virus known as COVID has been hard on all of us, just like the pandemics of the past were. And I looked it up. The world faced pandemics in 1918, 1957, 1968, and even in 2009.

Well, like all congregations, Covid HAS been hard on Redland. In fact, we can look back and see how all five purposes of our church have been affected.

For example, we had to learn to obey Hebrews 10 and not forsake gathering together--by gathering virtually. That's worked well, but it's affected our fellowship, hasn't it? Not being able to BE together as weakened relationships. Some attenders and even members have just slipped away in the past two years.

It's affected our worship—Yes, our numbers are good when you include those who worship virtually, but the choir is smaller, our orchestra is only able to play when the choir is not singing so as to lower the possibility of spreading the virus. Children's choirs have not been able to meet. I miss them so much!

Covid has also affected our discipleship--we have less Grace Groups than we did in 2019.

The virus has affected our evangelistic efforts in the sense that we haven't been able to send mission teams as we did in the past.

And when it comes to SERVICE--COVID made it hard for us to visit people in the hospitals. It's made it hard to visit our shut-ins.

Thankfully I have not been stricken with Covid---yet---but the people who have had it tell me it makes their bodies feel weak, exhausted. And in the FIVE ways I mentioned, it's done that to our church body. It's like me, when I was younger, stronger, healthier, I could lift this 200lb barbell at least to my waist. Now, I can't even get it off the floor. The church feels like that--weaker.

One thing we have learned is that the healthier a person is, the better they do when they contract a virus; be it H1N1, H2N3, R2D2, COVID, or whatever. And that brings us to this year's vision---I believe God is calling us to STRENGTHEN this body of believers---He wants us to build it up. No matter how many variants come our way---He wants us to feel strong again---like I felt back in the days when I could actually lift this.

I want us to think of this year's vision is a "TOTAL CHURCH BODY WORK OUT." I feel God leading us to get all five of our purposes healthy and strong. He's calling us to BUILD UP THE BODY OF CHRIST AT REDLAND! So, instead of one VISION sermon, the rest of the pastoral staff is joining me and we are doing FIVE, an entire series on the subject of Building Up the Body of Christ at Redland.

It starts today as I preach on Building Up the Body through Discipleship. Next week I'll talk about Building Up the Body through Fellowship. Then on January 30, Bill will preach on Building Up the Body through Worship. February 6, Peggy will preach on Building Up the Body through Ministry or Service. And on February 13, Kevin will preach on Building Up the Body through Evangelism.

Okay let's get started. I want us to begin this FIRST Vision sermon by reading some passages from God's Word that deal with discipleship. If able, I would ask you to stand in respect for God's Word as it is read. You can follow along as I start with Matthew 4:18-22.

Matthew 4:18-22

18 - As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

19 - "Come, follow Me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

20 - At once they left their nets and followed Him.

21 - Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them,

22 and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him.

Matthew 16:24-25

24 - Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.

25 - For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it.

Philippians 2:12-16

12 - Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence---continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

13 - for it is God Who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose.

14 - Do everything without grumbling or arguing,

15 - so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky

16 - as you hold firmly to the Word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.

Okay, with these familiar passages in mind let's go back to the basics and remind ourselves what discipleship is. What do we mean when we say someone is a disciple of Jesus? Well, a disciple is someone who has a growing and deepening RELATIONSHIP with God through Jesus Christ. As some point every disciple admitted to God that they were sinners. They believed Jesus is His Son and that He died for them on the cross. They asked Jesus to forgive them and to lead them through life.

Contrary to a popular misconception, Christian discipleship is not a religion. It is not memorized creeds or religious activity. It is a relationship with Jesus. It's not just PATTERNING our lives after Jesus' teachings. It's KNOWING Jesus. As someone put it: *"It's not imitation---it's inhabitation."* And all people long for this relationship with our Lord.

As I said last week, humans were created for relationship with God. Humans were made to literally walk side-by-side with God through life as Adam and Eve did before they sinned. So, all people can relate to Psalms 42 and 63 which say, ***"As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for You, the living God. I earnestly seek You; my soul thirsts for You — my body longs for You in a dry and weary land where there is no water."***

They may not be aware of it, but all people have a hunger in their souls to KNOW God---but sin is in the way---and the only way to remove it, is through faith in Jesus. I'm sure Kevin will talk more about this in HIS sermon on evangelism. But I do want to point out that in the days of Jesus' first disciples, people believed that the way to get this relationship---the way to get close to God---was through a rabbi because he was viewed as being the very epitome of how God's truth was expressed through the Torah. They initiated a relationship with a rabbi. They left everything they owned to go and live with him. They would serve the rabbi, sit at his feet, watch him intently, and seek, by following him, to go where their longing for God could be satisfied. So, it wasn't odd that Peter and the others would follow Jesus. They saw Him as a rabbi Who had an unprecedented understanding of God's truth.

But what was contrary to popular practice was the fact that Jesus initiated this relationship. He invited these men to follow Him—they did not ask His permission to do so. This tells us that not only do we hunger for a relationship with God. He wants one with us! Jesus showed that God has a personal interest in knowing all people. Joe Stowell, says,

“God lures us with persistent love into a deepening relationship with Him. He is God, and a relationship with Him literally explodes with the love and leadership we long for.”

Okay, let’s go a little deeper. Here are some things we need to know about discipleship, some basics we need to comprehend if our church body is to get stronger in this way.

1.) First, it’s a PROCESS.

In other words, becoming a disciple---becoming more like Jesus, deepening our relationship---takes time. Our relationship with Jesus doesn’t GROW so that we become like Him overnight. In fact, we won’t be totally like Him until we join Him in eternity. As Paul put it in Philippians 1:6: ***“The One Who has begun His good work in you will go on developing it until the day of Jesus Christ.”***

Discipleship is a commitment to a life-long process of becoming more like our RABBI--Jesus.

Do you remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff? He said that when he first came to the United States from Russia, he wasn’t prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He said, *“On my first shopping trip, I saw POWDERED MILK---you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw POWDERED ORANGE JUICE--- you just add water and you get orange juice. And then I saw BABY POWDER and I thought to myself, WHAT A COUNTRY!”*

Many times, we expect to become like Christ this fast--instantly at conversion. But growing stronger as a follower of Jesus takes time. As Hendricks says, *“Disciples are MADE not BORN.”*

Saul met Christ in an instant of time on that Damascus road but he didn’t become Paul until several years of mentoring and study had passed. Growing as a disciple of Jesus takes time. And that leads to a second basic fact about discipleship:

2.) The process requires PROGRESS.

This is why in our text, Paul compares the Christian journey toward Christlikeness to a race because running in a race involves making progress. There is a starting line, and there is a finish line. The gun goes off, the runners begin to run, and they make progress, one foot after another foot, toward the goal. That’s a great word picture of the life of a Disciple of Jesus. In fact, the keyword in the Christian life is not *“perfection.”* It’s *“progression.”* If we are to be growing, HEALTHY, STRONG, disciples, we must constantly be asking ourselves this question: *“Am I making progress as a Christian?”* If the answer is *“No”* we need to make some changes.

Of course, implied in this point is that making progress in a race involves going in the right direction. You’ve got to run toward the finish line! Like a foot race, if you run in circles or if you run backwards, you’ll never finish. If you violate the rules and run across the boundaries of the track, you will be disqualified. It’s important that you run in the right direction!

Do you remember the oft-told story of “Wrong-way Reigels?” In 1928 southern California played Georgia Tech in the Rose Bowl, and at that game there was an event that made sports history. There was a fumble on the field, and a man by the name of Roy Riegels picked up the ball. He began to run. He eluded one tackler here, another over there, running that ball 80 yards! It was the best run of the day! But finally, as you can see in this blurry image, Roy Riegels was tackled by his own teammates just short of his own goal line.

You see, in all the confusion of the fumble, Roy Riegels had run 80 yards in the wrong direction.

With this old story in mind, I wonder if God ever looks down from Heaven on His children at times and shakes His head, saying, *“There goes old Wrong Way Mark. There goes old Wrong Way Peggy. There goes Wrong Way Bill and Wrong Way Kevin is right behind him. Those guys are always running off in the wrong direction in their Christian life.”*

A disciple makes progress, GROWS to be more and more like Jesus. Here’s a third discipleship fact we must remember:

3.) When making progress in the process you will be OPPRESSED.

It is indeed like running a long-distance one race. If you've done that you know it is hard. The last "long-distance" run I competed in was a 10k in Olney about ten years ago. Daniel and Becca challenged me to run this race with them so I signed up, but by the time the day of the race dawned, both of them backed out because of injuries. So, I ran by myself and I remember each mile was harder than the one before. The sadistic individual who laid out the race course included steep hills where I just wanted to stop and walk. But I didn't, even though my legs felt like rubber and my knees hurt and my lungs felt like they would burst. It was a hard 10k and the Christian life is that way. Following Jesus, growing to be more like Him is a matter of endurance and struggle and difficulty. Yes, there is victory—there is victory now and there's victory when we cross the finish line and enter Heaven—but between now and then it's a struggle.

That might be one of the reasons why we have an English word that we have borrowed from the Greek word in the Bible that is translated as "race." In the Greek the word for "race" is "agona." Does that sound like an English word you've heard? Well sure: the word "agony."

It's NOT easy to be a disciple of Jesus. You're going to go through pandemics. You are going to have friends die. You're going to be rejected by the world in the same way it rejected Jesus. The devil is going to try and trip you up over and over again.

It's hard to make progress, but the hard times are good for us. Struggles make us stronger. Jerry Bridges writes, *"The development of a beautiful Christlike character will not occur in our lives without adversity. The only way Christlike character is developed is in the crucible of real-life experience."*

And he is right. You see if we are to become like Christ, we will have to go through the same things He did and Jesus endured incredible adversity and unfairness. The truth is great Christians---STRONG believers---who make up STRONG Church bodies, always graduate from the school of conflict, never the school of convenience. I encourage you to ask yourselves: *"How has God used COVID to STRENGTHEN me as a disciple of Jesus?" "What lessons have I learned?"* The struggle---is part of the process---it's one thing that leads to PROGRESS. I like how Joni Eareckson Tada put it: *"When life is rosy we may slide by without knowing about Jesus, with imitating Him and quoting Him and speaking of Him. But only in suffering will we KNOW Jesus."*

I hope this pandemic ends soon, but even if it does, there will be other pandemics--other hardships. It's not supposed to be EASY to follow Jesus. This week I read that back in the mid-50s, Parker Brothers came out with a game for church families to play. It was called *"Going to Jerusalem."* Your playing piece wasn't a top hat or Scottie dog, like in the game of Monopoly. No, in *"Going to Jerusalem,"* you got to be a real disciple. You were represented by a little plastic man with a robe, a beard, some sandals, and a staff. In order to move across the board, you looked up answers to questions in the little black New Testament provided with the game.

You started in Bethlehem, and you made stops at the Mount of Olives, Bethsaida, Capernaum, the stormy sea, Nazareth, and Bethany. If you rolled the dice well, you went all the way to a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But you never got to the Crucifixion or Resurrection. There were no demons or angry Pharisees. You only made your way through the nice stories. It was a safe adventure, perfectly suited for a Christian family on a Sunday afternoon walk with Jesus. But it was far from accurate! Traveling with Jesus wasn't meant for plastic disciples who only have good times. If you're going to walk with Jesus as His disciple in this world, you may need to change your expectations. After all, Jesus said anyone who would be His disciple, must, ***"Take up his or her cross, and follow Him."***

Here's one more thing we must understand about discipleship.

4.) It's OTHERS-centered.

We don't pursue Spiritual growth just for our own fulfillment. We do so for the benefit of others.

As you know I served a church in Delaware a few decades ago as the Minister of Education. Part of my job was encouraging our members to take certain classes offered by the SBC for which they would get a certificate and we

mounted those certificates on a long wall in the church. The problem was people became self-centered. They took pride in having more certificates on the wall than anyone else. I mean, that practice led us to run the race in the wrong direction because don't grow just for ourselves. We do it for the sake of others.

The scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day thought of themselves as very holy, but they couldn't love anybody. They were too absorbed with themselves. To build up our body here at Redland we must each remember that the New Testament never defines spiritual growth in solely individualistic or narcissistic terms. It's defined in terms of community. We see this in Philippians 2:14 where Paul writes, ***"Do all things without murmuring and arguing."*** In other words, as members of the church mature there won't be any grumbling or arguing, just grateful hearts. Bitterness and resentment will be replaced by a community of servanthood.

The main goal of discipleship is to become like Jesus and Jesus LOVES all people. As 1st John 3:14 puts it, ***"This is how we know we have passed from death to life---[this is how we know we have made progress as disciples]---we love each other."*** Okay, that's a quick refresher course in discipleship.

But HOW do we grow?

A.) Spend time with other DISCIPLES.

One of the best ways we learn how to be more like Jesus is by spending time with Christians who are further down the road than we are. We can learn from their mistakes--their victories.

Have you ever wondered why cats get stuck in trees? I mean, they obviously know how to climb up, but they just as obviously don't know how to climb down. I mean, Superman is always having to fly up to where they are perched and save them and in gratitude many cats dress like Superman. Why is that? Why can't cats just climb down themselves? Well, Temple Grandin who is an animal expert has a theory. She claims, that at some point, mother cats teach kittens how to descend from a tree, just as they teach their young a great many other things that were once thought to be innate cat behavior, including how to hunt, bury their waste, deal with live prey, approach an unknown person or dog, and so forth. Ms. Grandin believes the cats that get stuck in trees are cats that were taken from their mothers before the lesson about getting out of trees could be taught. I don't know about that--but it makes sense to me--because we all learn best from others.

And that applies to discipleship. We learn how to follow Jesus by watching and imitating other followers of Jesus. I'll talk more about this next week, but in the coming year we are going to work to find more ways for us to BE together as a church so we can learn from each other.

Here's another way to grow as a disciple of Jesus.

B.) Spend time with JESUS.

One way we do that is by working alongside our Lord. If you've read Henry Blackaby's classic book, *Experiencing God*, then you know he says that Christians shouldn't ask God's will for their life. Instead, they should ask what His will is and become a part of it. As we co-labor with God we build our relationship and we become more like Him. As we work side-by-side with our Lord as He does His work--He rubs off on us.

Another way to spend time with Jesus is of course through prayer and by studying His written Word. Pastor Kevin is coming now to share about one thing we will be doing this spring to help encourage us all to spend more time with Jesus in His Word.

KEVIN SHARES

Thanks Kevin! I'm looking forward to WALKING THROUGH THE NT! It's a great way to build up the body of Christ.

Let's pray.