

In the beginning, God created Paradise. You know Paradise. You've never actually been there but it lives inside your heart and mind. It is a place untouched by the chaos and confusion that surround us on this fallen planet. God created the first human occupants of Paradise and delegated His authority to them so they would rule over His glorious Kingdom. He said, "be fruitful and multiply." He wanted them to fill the earth with people created in His image and likeness so that God's glory would cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. But (spoiler alert) it didn't happen. Paradise was lost but God had a plan.

The first two chapters of Genesis describe Eden as a garden featuring the tree of life, a river that watered this garden and even precious stones accentuating the beauty to God's creation. Fast forward to the end of the story and in the final two chapters of Revelation we read about a Heavenly City coming down out of Heaven, a city prepared for all those related to Jesus by faith. And guess what is there? The tree of life, a river and precious stones. God's original plan was for us to enjoy Paradise forever but something went terribly wrong. Paradise was lost. But God, being rich in mercy, had a plan to restore creation and bring Him glory again. Paradise is possible to people who participate in the plan.

We are all born with eternity in our hearts. The worse conditions get on this fallen planet the more we long for the new heavens and new earth we read about in Revelation. I attended a funeral last week and was reminded once again that death is unnatural. There is something in us that will not accept it. Even though the statistics on death are indisputable (they may be the only statistics that are not disputed) still we are surprised when someone dies. Why? Because God has placed eternity in our hearts. We just know there must be more. And there is. ALL people live forever. Some will live in the presence of God in the place Jesus said He was preparing for those who believe in Him. The rest will be separated from their Creator forever.

Just as God is glorified through a restored and renewed Kingdom, He is glorified through a restored people. God's nature, manifested at creation, becomes even more clear through His re-creation. He is glorified when we are renewed and repurposed. We were once "dead in our trespasses and sins." Because of sin, all fall short of the glory of God. But we have a promise from God, "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creature. Old things have passed away, all things have become new." 2 Cor. 5:17. We have a new heart, a new purpose, a new perspective. The mission of the church corporately and individually is to be a sign and a foretaste of the Kingdom to come. Our calling is to explain through teaching and express through our actions what the Kingdom of God is like. How do we do that? Jesus expressed it this way, Mt. 28:18-20...

He said this to those who had chosen to follow Him. Only a disciple can make a disciple. Once you have said "yes" to the invitation to become a citizen of the Kingdom of God through an intimate relationship with the King, you then become authorized to invite others to join you as you learn and live out the ways of the Kingdom. Jesus didn't establish an institution to make disciples He made disciples of twelve men and then sent them out to do the same with others. So what does that look like today? Where do I start? Let me offer 5 suggestions:

1. CHOOSE your domain. Making disciples begins by asking, "Where has God placed me? What is my domain?" If you are a teacher your domain is education - your class or your school. If you are in business your domain is the business world - your office. If you are a medical worker your domain is medicine - the hospital. If you are a soccer mom your domain is your neighborhood - the kids and moms of the soccer team. The first word of the Great Commission is not "go" but "as you are going, make disciples." This command was not given to members of the clergy but to fishermen and accountants. Disciple-making begins where you are, in your domain.

Jesus made disciples by entering into the daily lives of ordinary people. He never encouraged His disciples to escape from the world but to enter into the suffering of this fallen planet. Many people don't take Christianity seriously because they view Christians as escapists. We are seen as "pie in the sky, by and by, when we die" kind of people, huddled together whistling in the dark while the earth is trashed. A Lifeway survey asked people to respond to the statement, "Christians get on my nerves." 43% said they somewhat or strongly agreed while 72% said the church is full of hypocrites. But here's the good news. 89% said they have at least one close friend who is a Christian. (*LJ*, Winter '09). So, while most people have been disappointed by the antics of some Christians (remember Donald Trump says he is a "strong Christian.") the majority of people are still in close proximity to someone who is a follower of Christ. What an opportunity to be an ambassador of the King.

The world needs to see a different kind of Christian - one who sees all of life as sacred, one who sees their chosen profession as an opportunity to demonstrate what the kingdom is like. If you're a doctor you bring healing to people because there is no sickness in the kingdom. If you're a lawyer you fight for justice because there is no injustice in the kingdom. If you are a teacher you provide education because the kingdom is filled with the knowledge of God. If you are a carpenter you build things just as Jesus is building a place for us. Master your craft, be the best you can be and do everything to the glory of God.

Ask God, "Who am I currently in contact with that needs to know Jesus?"

2. USE your gifts and abilities to explain and express the reality of the Kingdom of God. Few things are more painful than watching someone try to do something they are not equipped to do. American Idol! On the other hand, it is inspiring to observe people doing what they are designed to do. People with the gift of hospitality/mercy inspire me. I don't have those gifts but they are so necessary to God's kingdom purposes. Use the gift God has given you to draw people to Jesus. You don't have to have the gift of evangelism to draw people to Jesus. For example, if you have the gift of hospitality, you can take some friends to Harvest America, hear the music of Chris Tomlin, Lecrae, Mercy Me, Switchfoot, and a clear gospel message by Greg Laurie.

3. FUSE your life with others. Do life together. Discipleship is a team sport. We are not making disciples of ourselves but disciples of Jesus. That requires a team effort. The reason I am so committed to Life Together groups is because of the power of the team in bringing people closer

to Jesus. One person opens their home and creates an inviting environment. Another person takes an interest in a first-timer using their gift of mercy to show genuine concern about their life. A third person with the gift of service hears about a need they have and says, "I can fix that." A fourth person with the gift of teaching shares the fundamentals of the Gospel in a clear way. You get the idea. There is power in a small group with a singular purpose. In fact, anthropologist Margaret Mead once observed, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

4. REFUSE distractions. We are bombarded by distractions. We fill our minutes, hours, and days thinking about everything but making disciples. At best, we set aside an hour or two a week (or month) to come listen to some guy make us feel guilty about our attention deficit disorder. Create some space in your life to invite others into the discipleship experience. Introduce them to the people who inspire and encourage you. Make it a priority to be part of a missional community. What is that? Darrell Gruder defines it this way, ***"Rather than seeing themselves as one more civic institution offering religious goods and services to individuals, (missional communities) take the time to create gracious and caring space where they can reach out and invite their fellow human beings into a new relationship with God and with each other. They offer both the protection and the freedom to enable estranged and fearful human beings to bring the actual circumstances of their lives into conversation with the peace of the gospel. They lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and they attend to one another. Hostility is converted into hospitality, strangers into friends, and enemies into guests."***

5. LOSE the cynicism. There are plenty of reasons to be cynical in today's world but there are also reasons to be optimistic. Not the least of which is the fact that God is sovereign and He WILL make disciples of all nations. He is more committed to the Great Commission than we are. I often think of people in China who had no church buildings, no paid pastors, no seminaries, no Christian TV, radio, or literature and they grew in their faith in spite of the fact that their love for Christ was illegal.

Make it your ambition to glorify God with your one brief life. Make Him known. Show forth His nature. Let people know that no matter what happens in this life, there is another life to come. A couple of weeks ago I was reminded in a powerful way how important it is to keep Jesus at the center of our lives.

Monty Williams' eulogy...

Three TV sports commentators who are rendered speechless by the clear proclamation of the gospel by someone with a broken heart. Monty Williams and his wife Ingrid, two ordinary people with extraordinary faith. Their ambition was to live for the glory of God, to explain and express what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Well done Monty. Well done Ingrid. I only hope those are the words I hear when my time comes.