

Going Deeper: Cultivating Healthy Openness Together

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to our second Discipleship Training Night! Out of our 12 distinctives, *Fruitful Discipleship* is our focus these 9 months. Here's what we mean by *Fruitful Discipleship*: "WE TRAIN GROWING DISCIPLES WHO MAKE NEW DISCIPLES." You're here tonight because you want to go deeper into biblical discipling relationships.

Jesus has established these *committed spiritual training relationships* as a key way we grow, fellowship, then introduce others to him.

Getting Warmed Up

- ***Meet Your Table***: Be sure to meet each person at your table as we get started!
- ***Couples & Families***: Consider branching out for discussions so you get exposure to others besides your spouse or significant other. You might even switch seats or tables if it helps.
- ***Table Leaders***: Each table should designate a table leader for the all-table discussions.
- ***Different Exercises and Discussions***: Some table exercises you'll discuss among everyone, others will be in small groups or 1-on-1, and others will be personal and private to yourself.

Our Focus in These Trainings: The *Process* of Discipleship

Our focus in these trainings is not on general Bible knowledge, Christian doctrine, or Christian living. We trust you're receiving this kind of healthy biblical teaching through our Sunday morning services, life groups, equipping classes, and other ministries. In case you missed it, we encourage you to listen to our message on Fruitful Discipleship for some basic definitions along with our broader vision for discipleship (bridgepointbible.org/media → *Distinctives*).

With these foundations in mind, our focus in these training times will be the *process* of discipleship. We want to provide practical, step-by-step wisdom for building discipling relationships with other believers. Over time, these relationships should result in *mobilizing* each other to share Christ with those who don't yet know him.

Five Discipleship Training Nights

Here are the topics we're covering in our five training nights (subject to change if needed).

1. ***Getting Started: Wading into Discipling Relationships*** (Sept 10)
2. ***Going Deeper: Cultivating Healthy Openness Together*** (Oct 15)
3. ***Discipling the Heart: Helping the Inner Person*** (Dec 3)
4. ***Stepping Up: How to Affirm and Challenge in Discipling Relationships*** (Jan 7)
5. ***Passing It On: A Lifestyle of Reproducing Disciple-Makers*** (Feb 4)

REVIEW — Getting Started: Wading into Discipling Relationships

- 1. Discipleship and the Local Church:** The local church is God’s carefully crafted ecosystem for a believer’s spiritual growth. A healthy church is the ideal environment for discipleship.
- 2. One Step at a Time:** The first step is often the hardest. But once you get moving, the next steps become clearer.
- 3. What Are You Looking for?** Two initial questions: “What am I looking for? What am I wanting?” These questions help clarify your hopes and desires. The key is staying rooted in this principle: discipling relationships are meant to produce Christ-like character that results in spiritual multiplication in others.

**Personal Reflection and Discussion: What are you looking for in discipleship?
OR What have you enjoyed about discipleship?**

- 4. New Lifestyles, New Culture:** What we’re seeking to build as a church is *individual lifestyles of discipleship* that produce a *church culture of discipleship*. Over time, your spiritual growth should make you ready and eager for discipling relationships wherever you go.
- 5. Finding the Right Person to Disciple You** [individually or small group]
 - Ask God to guide and provide (1 Thess 1:11–12).
 - Start with your current circles (Rom 15:4).
 - Be proactive but not hasty (Prov 25:14; 6:6–11).
 - Clarify what you’re seeking.
 - Don’t be discouraged by hearing “no.”
 - Ask for help if needed.

**Personal Reflection and Discussion: List two people you’d like to disciple you
OR describe the impact a discipler made in your life.**

- 6. Inviting Someone into a Discipling Relationship**
 - Ask God to guide and provide (Luke 6:12–16; Prov 3:5–6; 2 Tim 2:2; Prov 12:15)
 - Start with an accurate self-assessment (Rom 12:3).
 - Don’t mistake timidity for humility (1 Tim 1:6–7).
 - Beware of lopsided motives or programs (1 Tim 1:5–7).
 - Get to know the person first.
 - Clarify your invitation (Matt 4:19; Titus 2:3–5; Acts 16:3).
 - Don’t be afraid of “rejection.”
 - Develop a plan and expectations together.
 - Know that you’ll learn as you go.
 - Set an initial timeline and be faithful to your commitment.

Personal Reflection — Inner Struggles with Offering to Disciple Someone: Are there any inner struggles you sense in your spirit when you think about inviting someone into discipleship?

Personal Reflection and Discussion: What do you think is your **next step?**

7. Three Discipleship Pathways

- *Pre-Discipleship:* 1-to-1 Bible Reading
- *Personal Discipleship:* An Informal Discipling Relationship with Two or More Individuals
- *Program Discipleship:* A Structured Curriculum and Timeline

Going Deeper: Cultivating Healthy Openness Together

Introduction

People use many words to describe a deep relationship with another person: *open, real, vulnerable, authentic, honest, safe*. But even believers who've experienced these meaningful relationships can struggle to initiate or cultivate them. Thankfully, Scripture is a rich resource providing a theological framework and practical wisdom for deepening our relationships as believers.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION: What's the deepest, most honest relationship you've had outside of family or romantic relationships? What factors led to the depth?

Biblical Principles for Cultivating Healthy Openness

- 1. The intra-Trinitarian love of God is the spring of all relationships.** The one true God exists in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. These three persons are infinite and eternal, perfect in every way—including their relationship with each other. Their eternal bond of holy love is unending. It is full and complete. For example, *"The Father loves the Son"* (John 5:20). ¹⁶*And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"* (Matt 3:16–17).
- 2. God designed human beings to join his community of holy love.** God's holy love overflowed in his creation of humanity. As creatures in his image, we're designed for bonded relationships of family, friendship, and fellowship—with him and each other. Genesis 1–3 shows this blueprint. Adam and Eve enjoyed unhindered fellowship with God and each other. Genesis 3:8 describes the norm in their relationship with God: *"they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day."* Earlier, we were told that *"the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed"* (Gen 2:25). Adam and Eve lived in open friendship and fellowship with God and each other. They sensed no need to hide in any of their relationships. Nothing was wrong, shameful, or needing justice or judgment.
- 3. Sin's invasion interrupts human intimacy and harmony.** What interrupted the deep, rich, unhindered fellowship Adam and Eve enjoyed with God and each other? What factors led to their terrified reaction in Genesis 3:8? *"The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God."* God's great enemy invaded his good world, tempting Adam and Eve to pridefully distrust God and selfishly mistreat each other. Together, they turned their relational paradise into a haunted house. Relationships became a sinister arena for abuse, blame, fear, neglect, mistrust, envy, hurt, and suspicion.

4. Sin’s corrupting influence creates all kinds of relational breakage and distance. Since we’re considering the topic of *openness*, we might ask: Why is it so easy to hide from each other? Because we all live with a SOUL-DEEP INSECURITY. It’s obvious that Adam and Eve hid from God. But they didn’t just hide from God. They also hid from each other. They sowed fig leaves to cover their shameful nakedness (Gen 3:7). They hid from God behind the trees he’d given them (Gen 3:8). They blamed others rather than taking responsibility (Gen 3:12–13). Their souls were fatally flawed, so their relationships were fundamentally changed. They also distrusted each other, because they’d both failed each other in deep and harmful ways. They began experiencing a SOUL-DEEP INSECURITY. Our sinful nature, actions, and habits produce this SOUL-DEEP INSECURITY. Through the conscience God’s given us, activated by his law, we sense a deep problem that is not self-solvable (Rom 2:14–16). We know in our bones that we’re guilty, dirty, and unclean; we’re inadequate, insufficient, and lacking. This blend of guilt, shame, fear, division, and suspicion is poisonous. Now, due to our sinful nature, actions, and habits, and the sinful nature, actions, and habits of others, to be known is to be hurt, judged, and condemned. Add to this our layers of deception and self-deception, and humanity lives in darkness. We can’t deny that we’re guilty, and by virtue of our guilt, we are ashamed and insufficient. Ephesians 4:17–19 describes the unregenerate mind as “*futile,*” “*darkened,*” “*alienated,*” “*ignorant,*” “*hard,*” and “*calloused.*”

5. There are many human methods for hiding. Adam and Eve’s first impulse is to *hide*. In their fallen condition, they want to avoid being seen and known. As human beings, we have many methods for hiding—many different kinds of leaves we sow together. Here are a few:

- ___ **Deflecting:** When God holds Adam accountable, Adam deflects. He focuses on his symptoms (naked/afraid) rather than his rebellion and guilt—the fundamental problem.
- ___ **Defending:** We defend ourselves when we refuse to acknowledge the truth, desperately searching for ways to justify (cover) ourselves.
- ___ **Blame-shifting:** Adam’s first response to God’s question is to defend himself by blame-shifting. Rather than first admit that he disobeyed God, Adam frames his “confession” by blaming Eve for what he’s done wrong (and blaming God, for giving him Eve!).
- ___ **Pretending:** Many Pharisees dealt with their spiritual problems by *pretending*. They created an entire system that promoted pretense and false spirituality through external standards, manmade traditions, selective obedience, and self-congratulation.¹
- ___ **Performing:** “Performing” in this negative sense means putting on an external act to mask or mitigate soul-deep problems we’re not addressing.
- ___ **Condemning:** It is tempting to criticize others unfairly in order to justify ourselves or take the focus off our own flaws.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION: What methods of hiding do you resonate with most (feel free to add your own)? Rank your top 2, and share any insights as you reflect on them.

¹ You can find simple explanations for several of these categories in Robert Thune, *The Gospel-Centered Life for Teens: Participant’s Guide* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014).

- 6. Every person lives with a deep enculturation.** In addition to conditioning from our past, we are enmeshed in overlapping cultures and subcultures whose influence shapes us. When you pick up a small, smooth stone from a streambed, you instinctively know how it became smooth. Its rough exterior was sculpted off as it bounced and slid along the riverbed. As its gravelly edges were banged off, they were also rinsed away by the passing current. We know that this influence happens incrementally, over time. In a similar way, a person shaped by western society will tend to be deeply individualistic. So a westerner will tend to be *an enculturated individualist*. But no matter where you're from, you're *enculturated*.
- 7. The rich, multi-faceted dynamics of the gospel transform a believer's soul *and* our relationships.** Often, people assume the gospel only changes a person's relationship with God. But Scripture teaches that Christ profoundly changes our relationships with each other. "The gospel" is far more than the basic truth that "Jesus died for my sins." The gospel is the glorious announcement of Christ's victory over sin, death, and Satan through a unified series of God's mighty acts whose effects stretch from the farthest reaches of the cosmos to the smallest pocket of the human soul. As the gospel awakens us, our relational desires and capacities are awakened as well. For example: Why can one believer freely share her problems with another believer? Because she knows all her flaws and failures are covered by the full righteousness of Christ which clothes her by faith. Why can one believer weep freely on the shoulder of another? Because he believes that his great high priest has been tempted just like him, yet without sin, so that Christ is ready with mercy and grace to help him in this time of need (Heb 4:15–16).

The gracious work of Father, Son, and Spirit in the gospel restores us to the Trinitarian love of God we were designed to enjoy from the beginning. Jesus prays "*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us*" (John 17:20–21). So Paul can say, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*" (2 Cor 13:14).

Practices for Cultivating Healthy Openness

- 1. Commit to a church family and gather consistently for worship, fellowship, and service.** There is no substitute for gathering regularly with a church family. Through sharing in prayer, singing, fellowship, teaching, service, and the ordinances, spiritual siblings grow together in deeper love and unity.
- 2. Meditate on our shared *position* in Christ to motivate your *practice*** (Eph 4:1–6). Believers are united in Christ. Believers are blood-bought siblings with the same Father. Believers share the same Spirit. "*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*" (Eph 4:4–6). We don't create our fellowship out of thin air. We just flesh out the fellowship we already have in Christ. The New Testament's main message to Christians is not: "Become who you should be!" The main message is: "Be who you are in Christ." Believers are all one with Christ—a spiritual family. Now, act accordingly.

3. **Deal with your own personal hindrances to deep relationships.** There are many reasons why a believer may struggle to build deeper relationships. But identifying your personal struggles is important for moving forward.

PERSONAL EXERCISE: Is there an issue in your life that consistently hinders you from open relationships with other believers? For example:

- A personality trait that struggles with deeper interactions.
- A traumatic past event, experience, or relationship.
- A specific fear about deeper interactions with others.
- A secret sin or pain you don't want exposed.
- Church hurt that leaves you primarily wary or questioning.
- A specific frustration that leaves you resistant or hesitant.
- Something else: _____.

4. **Ask better questions to get deeper answers** (Prov 20:5). Every parent of a school-attending teen knows what it's like to ask about their day: "So how was school?" And every school-attending teen knows what it's like to be asked by her parents: "So how was school?" The answer is usually the same: "Fine." Ask boring questions, get boring answers. The same is true of our relationships as believers: Ask shallow questions, get shallow answers. But what if we asked better questions? Not *weird* questions, not *manipulative* questions, not *cheesy* questions, but *better* questions. "*The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out*" (Prov 20:5).

- a. **Survey questions are like water-skiing** across someone's life, asking about the different categories of life that give us a breadth of perspective about them. Learn to circle the basic categories of life so that you can connect with people you don't know as well.

- "What do you do for work?"
- "Where's home for you?"
- "Tell me about your family."
- "What do you do in your free time?"

- b. **Focused questions are like scuba-diving** into one area of someone's life, exploring the specific features and scars and treasures and caverns that make up a person's life.

- "I'd love to hear about that season of your life."
- "How did losing your job affect your confidence?"
- "What do you think your spiritual gifts are?"
- "How did your parents' divorce affect you?"
- "How do you hope things are different in this next chapter?"

5. **Ask follow-up questions to build deeper relationships.** Your relationships may grow deeper when your first response to someone's answer is not a response but another question. "*If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame*" (Prov 18:13). Most people don't ask follow-up questions, so they only get the depth the other person offers.

PERSONAL EXERCISE: Find a partner and ask a question about their life. Then ask four follow-up questions in response to what they share. Then reverse roles. After, share any insights you're taking away.

6. **Share more openly to foster deeper relationships.** Many Christian communities look like a group of potential swimmers standing around a pool. Every now and then, someone dips a toe in, then pulls back. But we all know what happens when that first person jumps in. An invisible wall collapses. Relationships are similar: When one person opens up, barriers fall, and people sense permission for a new level of conversation, fellowship, or relationship. Jesus told his disciples, *"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you"* (John 15:15).
7. **Remember: Most meaningful ministry is on the other side of awkward.** Many Christians are allergic to tension. They avoid it at all costs. As a result, they miss most opportunities for meaningful ministry to others. But most meaningful ministry requires moving *through* awkwardness on the way to greater depth, interaction, and comfort. Learn to be an initiator—the one who makes that first awkward move. It will serve you all your life.
8. **Share diverse experiences to deepen your relationships.** Most relationships take place in a central arena: family, work, carpool, school, team, counselor. Yet relationships grow when we diversify our shared experiences. Immersive experiences like road trips, mission trips, or conferences can take our relationships deep quickly. The Christian community is meant to be an ongoing immersive experience. It is a community in which all important things are shared: possessions, joys, sorrows, celebrations, trials, meals. There's a reason why road trips or mission trips deepen our relationships and open doors in our hearts.
9. **Don't be a truthless listener or a truth-rusher.** Sometimes timid souls fall in love with *only* listening, caring, serving, and showing compassion. Yet they slip into being truthless listeners, counselors, caretakers, and sympathizers. A loving friend doesn't affirm everything another person shares. Truthless listening leaves a brother or sister unshaped by the community. We are designed to be known, seen, heard, and loved. Yet we are also designed to be *shaped* by our fellow believers. Truthless listening values the person's feeling of acceptance over their actual well-being. But we must beware of the opposite, too. Truth-rushing is where we quickly react to what people share with biblical truths or corrections that often devalue the person and distort their issues. Corrective truths should be wielded slowly, like a scalpel, not tossed into conversation quickly like a grenade. What's the balance? *"Speaking the truth in love"* in Ephesians 4:15, as we both embody grace and truth and articulate it in wise and timely ways.
10. **Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy forms of openness.** There are healthy and unhealthy forms of openness. Unhealthy forms include gossip, slander, fleshly "venting" and "ranting," uncontrolled verbal processing, inappropriate pressure to share, or manipulating delicate information out of people who aren't ready. We should never pride ourselves in being "raw and real," as though "being real" justifies everything we might

express. We must also be thoughtful in male-female relationships, avoiding emotional intimacy that may tempt us toward unhelpful bonds or inappropriate interactions (believers struggling with same-sex attraction will want to pay attention to potential temptation with same-sex believers they may be drawn to).

11. Recognize windows when relationships tend to deepen. Ultimately, relationships are built out of shared moments. God is always opening providential doors for us to love others in ways that intensify our fellowship and strengthen our bonds. In these times, we gain increased access to each other's hearts. These are often times of uncommon joy, unusual sorrow, intense purpose, shared passion, or meaningful experiences. Leaning into these moments will sow seeds of friendship. These seeds can then sprout and blossom into beautiful fruit.

12. Partner in service and share in suffering. When we *give* together or *suffer* together, our relationships can grow immensely. Sharing one another's suffering bonds the soul. Our souls bleed at a deeper place when we suffer. Bonds are made possible in hardship that are not possible in easier times. As Paul says to the Philippians, "*It was kind of you to share my trouble*" (Phil 4:14).

PERSONAL REFLECTION: What's **one step** you could take to develop deeper relationships with other believers?