

“Intentional Discipleship”

Five Fruitful Practices, part 3

Colossians 1:1-14

[title slide] *Welcome, prayer.*

[Fruit and purpose statement] We are continuing a series based on the book, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Bishop Robert Schnase. We are reminding ourselves that our purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Examining ourselves in light of these five practices is like holding up a giant mirror, asking ourselves, “How well are we accomplishing our purpose? What can we do differently?”

[First two practices] So far we have covered two practices, “Radical Hospitality” and “Passionate Worship.” We mentioned how those two should work hand-in-hand. We welcome people and invite them to a loving relationship with God, and we worship God in Jesus Christ with everything that we are.

[Bible-Discipleship] We all know we are works in progress. That’s why today’s practice is such good news. Say this with me: “We can learn!” Today, we want to talk about the practice of “Intentional Discipleship/Faith Development.”

How we grow in faith and particularly how we study and apply the scriptures is very important. Take this story, for example.

[Board meeting] The Pulpit Committee at a certain church had invited a young minister to come over for an interview. The committee chairman asked, “Son, do you know the Bible pretty good?”

The young minister said, “Yes, pretty good.” The chairman said, “Well, why don’t you tell us the story of the Prodigal Son?” The young man said, “Fine.” And then he said:

“There was a man of the Pharisees name Nicodemus, who went down to Jericho by night and he fell upon stony ground and the thorns choked him half to death.

“The next morning Solomon and his wife, Gomorrah, came by, and carried him down to the ark for Moses to take care of. But, as he was going through the Eastern Gate into the Ark, he caught his hair in a limb and he hung there forty days and forty nights, and he afterwards did hunger. And the ravens came and fed him.

"The next day, the three wise men came and carried him down to the boat dock, and he caught a ship to Nineveh. And when he got there, he found Delilah sitting on the wall. He said, 'Chunk her down, boys, chuck her down.' And, they asked, 'How many times shall we chunk her down, until seven times?' And he said, 'Nay, but seventy times seven.' And they chunked her down four hundred and ninety times.

"And she burst asunder in their midst. And they picked up twelve baskets of the leftovers. And in the resurrection, whose wife shall she be?"

The Committee chairman suddenly interrupted the young minister and said to the remainder of the committee, "Fellows, I think we ought to ask the church to hire him as our minister. He is awfully young, but he sure does know his Bible."¹

...And that's how I became a pastor. Just kidding! Yet behind every joke there is a truth. There are many of us who would admit that we don't know the Bible as well as we should.

[Statements not in the Bible] Here is a little quiz to try: which of these statements are found in the Bible?

- "Money is the root of all evil." (A misquote from I Timothy 6:10)
- "God helps those who help themselves." (Found in Aesop's fables.)
- "Cleanliness is next to godliness." (Originally an ancient Babylonian and Hebrew proverb, but became very popular during the Victorian era after being revived by Sir Francis Bacon and John Wesley.)
- "The Lord works in mysterious ways." (1700's English poet and hymn writer, William Cowper)
- Hezekiah 4:3 "There are no internal combustion engines in heaven." (Joke from a religion professor to test his students.)

None of them are! There is a saying, attributed to Mark Twain, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

[Child reading the bible] This is why intentional faith development is so critical. We want to know what is, not what "ain't so." We want everyone be a

¹ <https://www.joshhunt.com/2010/05/18/chunk-her-down-boys/>

disciple, for the long haul. As much as I love Sunday mornings, churches do not make disciples simply by having 100 people show up, once a week, for an hour. Every single one of us needs to make a lifelong commitment to grow in faith, so that together, we can make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world.

[LL Staff] As a child, I made a personal decision to follow Jesus. Throughout my life, that choice was nurtured and encouraged in Christian community: my family, youth groups, summer camps, Emmaus, retreats, small groups, and seminary. It was not just my own personal bible reading that helped me grow in faith. I was involved in many groups, even before I answered the call to ministry.

Why should you and I desire to know the Bible and live like Christ? Why should we want to intentionally develop our own faith and the faith of others? The Apostle Paul has several answers for us in Colossians 1.

[verses] Colossians 1:13-14 reads, “God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” This is why we should want to know the gospel. It’s freedom. It’s forgiveness. It’s rescue from darkness, and goodness knows, the world needs rescuing right now. When we develop our faith, we equip ourselves for a world-wide rescue mission, following Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is good news, simply put. God created us. God loves us. Even though we’ve chosen our own selfish, sinful ways, God forgives us. By the cross of Jesus Christ, we can accept the grace God freely offers, gain eternal life, and conform our lives to the heart of Jesus.

[verses] Many people are content to know the gospel, like a trivia fact, yet they have difficulty experiencing it. Even in Paul’s time, this was true. In Colossians 1:9, Paul prays for his churches, asking God to fill them with wisdom and understanding. Once we accept the free gift of grace, God wants to fill us with kingdom values, purpose and truth. The goal, Paul says, is “to live a life worthy of the Lord and please him.” We are not only created to receive grace, we are created to grow, bear fruit, be strengthened, and receive endurance, patience and joy. That’s good stuff right there!

Understanding the gospel and living according to it bring an abundance of spiritual fruit. Maybe you’ve heard of Galatians 5:22-23: “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

control.” Paul says to the Colossians that he is thankful to see the fruit of the gospel springing up in them. They are like a well-tended orchard. The gospel has blossomed, and now fruit is popping up all over the place, fruit like hope and love. By believing and living the gospel, the Colossians are seeing fruit in their lives. They are seeing people come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. They are honoring God by doing good works. The church in Colossae is famous for their faith in action.

[Grace UMC] Personally, I’d love to see our church be famous, too. Not because of the music, or preaching, or even our coffee hours, which are pretty good. I’d love to be the church that bears extraordinary fruit: forgiveness, redemption, and a fresh start from God. A place where hurting folks are healed. Where broken relationships are renewed. Where grudges are forgiven. Where despair turns to hope. That’s what I’d love to see. Are you with me?

Good. We’ve answered the “why” of intentional faith development. Now we tackle the harder question. How?

I wish I could give you all the answers, but, I cannot. There is no standard two-minute pep talk that solves every problem in the church and ignites miraculous revival. Although if you want to try, the pulpit is yours next week.

[quote] Robert Schnase says it best: “Growth in faith does not come easily or automatically, but requires placing ourselves in community to learn the faith with others.” We have to place ourselves in the community of faith so that we can go deeper. In two words: SMALL GROUPS. We have to hear new voices and new ideas, and be held accountable for the faith we profess and the commitments we make. **[quote]** Again, Schnase says, “Bible study is not just about self-improvement, but about setting ourselves where God can shape us, intentionally opening ourselves to God’s Word and call.”

We may chuckle over ministers who don’t know the Bible and people who misquote verses, but how often does that describe ourselves? Are we content to know just enough of the Bible to have a good sound bite? Are we just surrounding ourselves with people who agree with whatever we say? If we were to study the Bible alone, we would be subject to selfish biases that would justify our current lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors. We need to be challenged! We

need each other, and we need small groups that encourage, admonish, support, and challenge us to grow in faith. Deliberate, intentional, biblical small groups.

The goal of intentional faith development is not to make us all into Bible scholars. I’m willing to bet someone here thinks, “I don’t know the Bible well enough, Pastor. How could I ever lead a small group?”

[You won’t know...] You won’t know unless you try. The only 100% guaranteed course of action is to do nothing. That outcome is predictable and requires no extra work. But if we want to bear fruit, if we want to jump on the gospel bandwagon that is producing fruit throughout the world, we cannot be afraid to try. A church that practices intentional faith development is not afraid of quote-unquote “failure.” We may start all sorts of groups. Some may take deep roots, and others may only exist temporarily. But we must always plant seeds.

I promise you, as your pastor, if you want to start a small group or ministry, I will not say no. I will say, “Let’s try it and see if it produces any fruit.” As your pastor, I give you permission to fail. I refuse to say, “We’ve never done it that way before.” If you ever catch me saying that, I will pay you a dollar. And better yet, if I hear one of you say, “We’ve never done it that way before that,” I’ll pay you a dollar to finish that sentence with, “but, we can try.”

[Praying hands and bible] Finally, we need one last thing: Prayer. There is no growth, nor fruit, nor making disciples, nor intentional faith development, without prayer. Paul prayed for the Colossians. He rejoiced every time he prayed for them. He heard they were doing great, so he prayed some more. He heard they were following the gospel, so he prayed they would be filled even more with God’s wisdom. Just because things are going great, doesn’t mean we stop praying. Prayer is the ultimate tool of faith development, because God is ultimately the one who fills us with knowledge. God gives us strength, power, endurance, and patience. God rescues us. And prayer is the line that keeps us connected to God.

[title slide] I want to challenge you this morning with one simple question. What would it take for you to grow in your faith? Would you join a small group? Would you step up to start a new one? In the end, it’s not about resources or numbers, it’s about priorities. It’s about risk. Are you willing to take that risk, to

not only grow your faith, but help someone else do the same? My prayer is that you will.

Memory Verse:

Acts 2:42 - “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Reflection questions:

1. What learning experience in your life has significantly changed how you live? How did you learn it? Have you shared it with others?
2. Why is it important to apply the Bible in our lives and to live like Christ?
3. What do you most want to learn about the faith? What settings are most favorable to your learning?
4. When in your life has someone partnered with you to learn or accomplish something? How did their presence make a difference?
5. What new opportunity could you pursue to intentionally develop faith in yourself and others?