



January 25, 2015
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Disciple-making 101: A 90 Day Challenge
Unflappable
Matthew 15-21

We are three weeks into our 90 Day Challenge as a church. For our visitors, our church is reading one chapter of a gospel every day until we've read all four gospels, which will take 90 days. Then we write down two things: "What did I learn about Jesus?" and "What did I learn about disciple-making?" It's a simple way to grow as a disciple, and I continue to be blessed by the buzz this has created. So weekly check in: How many read at least some of the seven chapters last week? All? Good job, you guys!

Every Sunday, the sermon touches on a disciple-making theme from the previous week's reading. The first theme was *Intentional*. Everything Jesus did was intentional, and if we are going to be effective disciple-makers for Jesus, we must live our spiritual lives on purpose! I got an email this week from a friend who, three years ago, was not a Christian. But he began to meet with our LifeGroup, studying the Bible, listening as we prayed and pretty soon, he was praying and sharing and finally, he gave his life to Christ. So he's brand new in the Lord. This week, our group couldn't meet and so my friend sent this message to all of us:

Everybody have a great weekend, and don't forget to keep your eyes and ears open for the opportunity to share the message—I'm spending it with a friend who's been incredulous about my own "Christian walk" so I'm gonna try my hand at this disciple making with him... "go big or go home"! Isn't that great? Intentional.

Then last Sunday it was *Relational*. I shared how God is renewing in me my call to be a shepherd of my sheep... to really take the time to listen and call and greet and care for people... one at a time. It was terrifying to say those things, because there are 2000 of you and one of me. Still, God is stirring me to be a better shepherd! And if everyone in this congregation committed to really being relational—not just surface-friendly, but deeply engaged in the lives of others—I don't care how big this church gets; it will be the most caring and welcoming church in town.

Pastor Bill and Jenny were out for a walk last week and saw a woman approaching them. As she passed them by, she leaned over and said one word: "Relational!" And just kept walking! She's obviously getting the message! I hope we all are.

So, intentional, relational, and now this morning's theme: *Unflappable*. What do I mean by that? Jesus knew that disciple-making is a long game. It isn't always an upward trajectory. There are times when disciples disappoint... times of failure and setback and even of betrayal. But Jesus never got flustered. He got frustrated... irritated, but he never got flustered. He knew this was a long game. He was unflappable.

I don't know what I was thinking when I arranged to do Marjorie Baldwin's memorial service last Sunday afternoon at 3:00. Do you remember what happened last Sunday afternoon? Yes, the NFC championship. But when I left home with nine minutes on the clock, I wasn't feeling a lot of regret. The Seahawks were getting killed. And at least I won't have to find a TV in Bethlehem next Sunday to watch the Super Bowl.

But as I was half way through the service, Paul our sound guy, (who is a rabid Seahawks fan) suddenly threw his arms up like this [touchdown sign] and began hopping up and down in the sound booth. I was the only one who could see him. Everyone else was looking at me as I tried to finish the message... and he's back there doing that!

It was pretty exciting, wasn't it? This was the headline the next morning: UNREAL! How many times did you hear people say, "That was the best football game I have ever seen." But actually, it wasn't the best football game I have ever seen. It was the best end to a football game I have ever seen. But as a matter of fact, if you were a Seahawks fan, most of the game was lousy. It was the worst half of the Seahawks' season. It was the worst game of Russell Wilson's career with four interceptions. It was the worst game of Jermaine Kearse's career with all four interceptions coming in passes to him. It was an awful game with a great ending!

It was the most spectacular two minutes and nine seconds of regulation play you'll ever see. And an overtime that ended with the redemptive catch by Kearse. (It was miraculous. Even the headlines sounded religious: "A Gift From On High!" "Kearse Responds to Adversity, Finds Salvation." If ever there was a game that illustrates the truth of Yogi Berra's adage— "It ain't over 'til it's over"—this was that game. But 58 minutes into the game, it looked pretty bleak.

When you read Matthew chapters 15-21 and watch as the disciples fumble the ball again and again... it seems pretty bleak. Those knuckleheads gave Jesus all kinds of reasons to give up on them! Let me show you two examples. Turn to Matthew 16. Jesus takes the boys up north to Caesarea Philippi. It is a place of great beauty. It was also a center of pagan worship; a huge temple complex dedicated to the god Pan. In that setting of idolatrous worship, the true Son of God asked the most important question He will ask of every human being: "Who do you say that I am?"

Do you remember Peter's answer? It was one of his finest moments: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." And Jesus brags on him! "Good for you Peter! You didn't come up with that answer yourself; God gave you that answer. And it is upon your confession of faith that I am going to build my church... and the Gates of Hell will not be able to stand against it." It was a high moment for Peter. For a guy who so often stumbled and stuffed his feet into his mouth, this was great. He must have been beaming with pride.

Well, it didn't last long. Let's read verses 21-23.

²¹From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²²Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" ²³Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Are there any more audacious words in the gospels than these: "Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him." Can you see it? Peter thinks he's on a roll. So when Jesus starts talking foolishness about his impending death, Peter decides to set him straight; to keep him from making a fool of himself. So he slips his arm over Jesus' shoulder and quietly pulls him aside so as not to embarrass him in front of the rest of the disciples... and then, Peter rebukes Jesus!

You see Jesus' response: "Get behind me, Satan!" So in one paragraph, Peter goes from being the rock upon which the Church will be built to being the Devil. Now that's a fall from grace. Things were looking so promising for Peter... way up here and then, bam... the bottom drops out!

One more story. It comes in chapter 20. Listen:

¹⁷Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

Let's really understand what's happening here. Jesus is telling them, as clearly as he can, that he will be arrested, tortured and murdered. You'd think that would be a somber moment for the disciples, wouldn't you? But listen to the very next verses.

²⁰Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹"What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

Wrap your head around that! Jesus has just told his disciples that he is about to die a horrific death. And on the heels of that, Mrs. Zebedee comes up, with her boys in tow, and lobbies for James and John to be the Executive Vice Presidents in Jesus' kingdom. My son Cooper and I have been doing the 90 Day Challenge together by email. About this passage he wrote, "It reminds me of the parents at Gig Harbor High that antagonized the coaches constantly to have their kids play. Seeing that always made me sick and upset. I'm sure Jesus felt the same way."

Again, we are up here dealing with the powerful reality of Jesus' sacrificial death... and suddenly, bam... back down to petty jealousies, rivalries and ambition.

And these are just two examples from last week's readings! There are so many more! Jesus feeds five thousand miraculously, and then when it comes time to feed four thousand, the disciples can't imagine how he is going to do it. Or Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on to a mountain and they witness his transfiguration where the glory of the God shines on him like the sun, and they come back down off the mountain and can't heal a man's son because they have such little faith. Or Palm Sunday where his disciples join with the crowds in proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and five days later abandon Jesus to the hands of his torturers.

Here are the 12 disciples that Jesus called, with whom he spent the most time, to whom he revealed the deepest meaning of his teaching, into whom he placed his Spirit and authority to perform great miracles... and yet, again and again, they stumbled, fell and even, in the end, denied and betrayed him. How tempted Jesus must have been to throw up his hands in despair! To chuck 'em all and start over. How surprised would you be to hear Jesus praying this prayer: "Uh, Father, you know that plan we had? That plan where I leave earth after three years of ministry and turn everything over to my disciples... that plan where the entire future of your kingdom on earth rests in their hands? Uh, do you have any other ideas? How about a plan B?"

But no! Jesus was unflappable! He knew disciple-making was a long game. Temporary setbacks, failures, disappointments did not fluster him. Sometimes it made him mad, and he certainly expressed his irritation with them. But he never wavered, never doubted, never second-guessed. He was unflappable. This was the Father's plan: to raise up disciples, train them, fill them with his Spirit, and send them out into the world to make other disciples. That was his only plan. There was no Plan B.

It is still His only plan. There is still no Plan B. We are Jesus' strategy for reaching the world, and we need to be reminded that there will be bumps along the way and that sometimes, things will go backwards in our own discipleship and in the lives of the disciples we are mentoring. And like Jesus, we need to be unflappable! We can't lose heart because of present circumstances. We have to trust that God, in the end, causes all things to work for good even when right now looks so discouraging.

I spoke with two different men this week who long for their sons to return to Jesus. Both of them, one with tears, spoke with yearning that the sons they love so deeply will rediscover the love they once had for Christ. Can any of you parents relate to that? You have tried to disciple your children—sometimes well, sometimes badly—but they are still wandering in a distant land? You must be unflappable! The final chapter of their lives has not been written. Cling to the proverb that says, "Raise up your child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it!" Proverbs 22:6. These dads need to remain unflappable!

Thursday I got a call from my daughter, Rachel. She's been invited to serve as the only staff member of a small church in Boston during her seminary. Preaching and leading for 3 months. In fact, she is preaching there this morning. But last week the elders made a decision regarding someone else that she found disappointing, and she doesn't know what to do. I'm not sure either, but I did tell her this: "The church is full of sinful people, and this won't be the last time they disappoint you. You might as well get used to it. But whatever you do, listen to the Lord, hold your temper, don't make hasty decisions, and (speaking from experience) don't take it out on everyone in your sermon!" Unflappable.

I met with a young woman this week. Her marriage is struggling, and some have encouraged her to bail. But she loves her husband and wants to keep her vows. And I had the privilege of rooting her on... encouraging her to believe that, if they are faithful and if they do the right kind of work, she can hope for a marriage that thrives instead of just surviving.

I wish our culture encouraged endurance. It does not. It encourages quitting. It encourages quick cynicism and abrupt changes of plans—chasing after something that seems less difficult and more fun. But the call to discipleship and disciple-making is, at times, disappointing! We will disappoint ourselves. And those whom we love and into whom we pour our lives... they will disappoint us, too, just as the disciples disappointed Jesus... perhaps for a long time. But he never stopped believing. We can't either. We must be unflappable! This is a long game! Who knows, it might come down to overtime! But never stop believing that God is at work.