

The Word is Near You: Scripture's Call to Discipleship

When we plan our discipleship initiatives, we often find ourselves asking what fresh, new idea might capture –and hold– the attention of the people whom we shepherd. I was asked to share some fresh perspectives on discipleship recently, and realized rather quickly that I didn't have anything fresh *or* new to say. But as I reflected on it, I wondered whether that was actually a good thing, because *the things that are true are seldom fresh or new*. In *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Eugene Peterson comments on the timelessness of truth. This book was first published in 1980, and in the preface to the 20th anniversary edition, he wrote,

“In the twenty years since I first wrote this book, enormous changes have taken place across the board all over the world and throughout the church. I find myself being told constantly and from almost every direction that I am in danger of becoming irrelevant if I don't stay current with the latest developments in computers and appliances and transportation and the media. And so as I sat down to revise *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* for this twentieth-anniversary edition, I was prepared to do a lot of changing.

I have done hardly any. It turns out that there are some things that don't change. God doesn't change: he seeks and he saves. And our response to God as he reveals himself in Jesus doesn't change: we listen and we follow. Or we don't. When we are dealing with the basics –God and our need for God– we are at bedrock. We start each day at the beginning with no frills.¹

We may express old truths in new ways, but it seems to me that the things that are true have

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2000), 11.

always been (and will always be) so. What I will share in this series of blog posts may not be anything you haven't heard before, but in revisiting old truths, we may well find new inspiration to walk in the way of Jesus.

Let's start with the basics. What *is* discipleship?

I cannot think of a passage in which Jesus is asked to define discipleship, but there are instances in which Jesus is asked what the most important commandment is, or alternately, what one must do to inherit eternal life.² For example, in Luke 10,

² Mark 12:28-31 – “One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’ ‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.”

^{Mark 12:28} Καὶ προσελθὼν εἰς τῶν γραμματέων, ἀκούσας αὐτῶν συνζητούντων, ἰδὼν ὅτι καλῶς ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς, ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτόν· ποία ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη πάντων; ²⁹ ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι πρώτη ἐστὶν· ἄκουε Ἰσραὴλ, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν, ³⁰ καὶ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος σου. ³¹ δευτέρα αὕτη· ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν. μείζων τούτων ἄλλη ἐντολὴ οὐκ ἔστιν.

Matthew 22:35-40 – “One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matt 22:37 – ὁ δὲ ἔφη αὐτῷ· ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου.

Luke 10:25-29 – “On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ‘What is written in the Law?’ replied. ‘How do you read it?’ He answered: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’, and ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ ‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’ *But he wanted to justify himself*, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’”

Luke 10:27 – ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ἰσχύϊ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου, καὶ τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν.

Leviticus 19:18 – “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.” :יהוה יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד; דתהוה יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד; לך לך; LXX: καὶ οὐκ ἐκδικᾶται σου ἡ χεὶρ, καὶ οὐ μνηεῖς τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ λαοῦ σου καὶ ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν· ἐγὼ εἰμι κύριος.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

:יהוה יהוה אחד; דתהוה יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד; לך לך; LXX: ἄκουε, Ἰσραὴλ· κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν. ⁵ καὶ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς δυνάμεώς σου.

LXX: ἄκουε, Ἰσραὴλ· κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν. ⁵ καὶ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς δυνάμεώς σου.

²⁵ An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and **with all your soul** and **with all your strength** and with all your mind”, and “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

In this interesting little exchange, a Bible teacher³ correctly identifies the weightiest matters in the scriptures,⁴ the commands closest to God's heart: love God, and love your neighbour. These commands come from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 – books often regarded as irrelevant to us today. But I am suggesting that *the things that are true are seldom fresh or new*; Jesus did not come to write new scriptures, but to fulfill old ones; Jesus has shown us what it means to live a life fully aligned with the revealed words of God. And so in Luke 10, Jesus discusses Deuteronomy and Leviticus – his scriptures and ours – with this Bible teacher.

Most translations render Deuteronomy 6:5 as “Love the LORD with all your heart and *with all your soul* and with all your strength”, and that is ok as long as we understand what the Hebrew word *nefesh* and its Greek counterpart *psyche*, the words represented by the English word *soul*, mean in these passages.

In the Old Testament, *nefesh* refers to all of our embodied existence. We tend to think

3 I want something other than “expert in the law”, because “expert in the law” conjures for contemporary people lawyers, not Bible teachers. I’d use “pastor”, but that’s too anachronistic. I’d use “rabbi”, but I think it creates too much distance. I want the audience to see themselves in the teacher, because as leaders in the church, they ought to identify with him (even if they have nowhere near his grasp of the scriptures) rather than with Jesus, which is who I think a lot of Christians tend to identify with when reading exchanges between Jesus and Jewish leaders.

4 Matthew 23:23 (cf Luke 11:42, Mark 12:33: “To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself *is more important than* all burnt offerings and sacrifices”).

of human beings as consisting of body and soul, but this is not how the Old Testament writers thought of it. There *is* no word in biblical Hebrew that corresponds to our concept of “body.”⁵ The word that most closely corresponds to our notion of “body” is גוף, which occurs only in 1 Chronicles 10:12 and refers to corpses.

A living person is a *nefesh*. A human being consists of, in the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the dust of the earth and the breath of God.⁶ At the end of our lives, the breath of God returns to God and what is left is a corpse, a *gufâ*. There is no “body” in BH thought; there is the *nefesh*, the living person –dust of the earth enlivened by the breath of God– and there are corpses. Those are the Old Testament categories.

And so, when we are called to love the LORD with all our heart, all our *nefesh*, and all our strength, what we are being called to is to love the LORD with our entire life, our whole embodied existence.⁷ We must love the LORD in every aspect of life; *discipleship encompasses all of who we are*. No aspect of our existence should be untouched by the process of discipleship. Discipleship is a process by which all of our lives become more fully aligned

5 The BH word that most closely corresponds to our notion of “body” is גוף, which is sparsely attested (occurring only in 1 Chr 10:12) and refers to corpses. A living person is a *nefesh*; once animating breath of God returns to God, what is left is a *gufâ*. My thanks to W. U. Haase for bringing this text to my attention.

“Early Hebrew apparently had no term to designate the body as a whole in our sense of the word. It preferred to speak of various parts and organs individually. The nearest term to 'body' is בשר, 'flesh,' which is used 127 times indicating the flesh of animals and men. But this word also has other meanings, such as kinship and as a metonym for man, or for all living beings, as over against God. The late Aramaic of Dan. 3:27; 4:30; 5:21 introduces the word גשם for 'body'; and 7:15 uses גדנה. But none of these Semitic words acquired any important theological meanings” (S. V. McCasland, “Body” in *IDB* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962], 451.)

6 Rabbi Sacks, “Happiness in the Jewish Perspective,” in a lecture at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University, https://youtu.be/2S_rqcJnvpE.

7 Greek ψυχή seems to be operating in a similar manner. “In ancient Gk. lit. the ψυχή is conceived as being combined with the body. When it leaves the body, the body loses its life ... Then by metonymy the soul can simply stand for life ... In addition, since the term can refer to the inward part of a person, by metonymy it can mean 'person'” (*NIDNTE* Vol 4, 726). More importantly, “Often in the NT ψυχή denotes life itself, as in Jesus’ well-known statement that 'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matt 16:25 NRSV par.; cf. John 12:25). The significance of these words becomes clear from the example of Jesus himself and his death and resurrection: true life is ever only won through sacrifice” (*NIDNTE* Vol 4, 729-730).

with the purposes of God; discipleship is the means by which Jesus becomes Lord of all we are.

What does discipleship have to do with the Great Commission?

Discipleship is a process by which our whole life becomes more fully aligned with the purposes of God, but this is not a solo activity. Discipleship takes place in community. We spread the good news of Jesus Christ with the idea that when someone receives the gospel, they join a living body where the process of discipleship is ongoing. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus commands the eleven,

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”⁸

All of those commands – go, make disciples, baptize, teach – are plural. We are not lone evangelists, singlehandedly going out and winning souls for Christ. No, we are disciples in community. The way we love one another bears witness to Christ, and through us, God draws people to himself.⁹

There is nothing new or innovative about this, but *the things that are true are seldom fresh or new*. From Genesis to Revelation, God reveals God's-self through community – through the nation of Israel and through the Church, building a holy priesthood as we

8 Matt 28:19-20 πορευθέντες μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος,²⁰ διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν. καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος.

9 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as we (in the words of Jesus) *teach* one another how to *obey everything* he has commanded us.¹⁰

Question: You make it sound simple, but what does discipleship look like in the world today?

Well, I do think that discipleship is more straightforward than we think, and boils down to some basic elements: devoting ourselves to understanding the scriptures and living by them, sharing everything in common, meeting together for prayer and table fellowship, and service.¹¹ These are the means by which all of our lives become more fully aligned with the purposes of God; these are the means by which we are conformed to the image of Christ.

There are those who liken the Church in the West and in Australia in particular to Israel in exile. If the Church is in exile, we need to understand **why**. Thankfully, we have scriptures for that. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses foretells a time in which the people of God will

¹⁰ On Israel and the church being a holy priesthood and holy nation, see Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:9.

In his final moments with his friends, Jesus repeatedly calls on his disciples to express their love for him *by obeying his commands*: John 14:25, 21, 23, 24; 15:10, 12, 14.

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly *as you teach one another with all wisdom*, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:15-17).

¹¹ “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. *All the believers were together and had everything in common*. Selling their possessions and goods, *they gave to anyone who had need*. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may *spur one another on toward love and good deeds*. *Let us not give up meeting together*, as some are in the habit of doing, *but let us encourage one another* – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

“For those God foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the likeness of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29); “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:2); “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, *are being transformed into his likeness* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

be exiled. Moses says that once the exiled people of God return to God,

⁶The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live ... ⁸Then you shall again obey the LORD, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, ⁹and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil.

For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

If the Church is in decline or an exile akin to the exile that Israel experienced, we need to understand *why*. According to Moses, exile is the result *not* of post-modernity, *not* of a failure to draw young people and families to church, *not* of people “being too busy these days” – no: *exile is the result of failure to attend to scripture*.

In the Great Commission, Jesus tells us to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*”

If the Church is in exile, *it is because it has failed to attend to scripture*. We have failed to become fully aligned with the purposes of God, we have ceased discipling the body of Christ, teaching one another to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us. And the

The Word is Near You: Scripture's Call to Discipleship

things that Jesus commands us are all in his scriptures, what we call the Old Testament –*the things that are true are seldom fresh or new*– as well as the gospels, epistles, and the other texts of the New Testament.

The cause of exile is remarkably simple: failure to attend to scripture; failure to keep God's commands.

The solution to exile is equally simple; Moses says, “heed the LORD and obey all His commandments” (Deut 30:8); Jesus simply says, “keep my commands.”¹²

But even this solution is a gift of grace. Moses says in verse 6 that it is the LORD who “will circumcise our hearts and the hearts of our descendants, so that we will love the LORD our God with all our heart and soul, in order that we may live.” Jesus says that the Spirit will guide us into all truth (John 15:13); the Spirit “will teach us all things and remind us of everything he has taught us” (John 14:26).

Our only responsibility is to return to the LORD and to heed God's commands.

It is God's responsibility to circumcise our hearts,

to send the Spirit to teach us, and

to empower us to love the LORD our God with all of our embodied existence,

that we might live.

And as if Moses can hear our protests about promoting ourselves on social media and establishing a good web presence, and all of our other various strategies to save the church and grow our numbers, Moses goes on:

¹² John 14:15, 21, 23, 24; 15:10, 12, 14.

The Word is Near You: Scripture's Call to Discipleship

Deut 30:11 Now what I am commanding you is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. ¹²It is not up in heaven, so you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” ¹³Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” ¹⁴No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

But is it? Is the word very near us? Is the word in our mouth and in our heart, or is it just on our phones? Why should we memorize it when we can look it up? Why should we read it aloud, have the word of God in our mouths and in our ears, when we've heard it all before? This, I think is the heart of the issue.

Discipleship is not complicated, but it is all consuming.

Discipleship requires effort; discipleship requires sacrifice.

As my pastor Darrell Johnson would say, “The only reason a person takes up a cross is to be crucified on it.”¹³ The only way to be a living sacrifice is to continue on the way, to continue meeting together,¹⁴ to continue to, in the words of Acts 2:42-47,

devote ourselves to the scriptures, to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer; to hold everything in common, selling our possessions and goods, and giving to everyone who has need; to break bread in homes and eat together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God.

¹³ I heard Darrell Johnson say this in a sermon at First Baptist Church in Vancouver sometime between 2010-2015, but I cannot be more precise than that. If anyone knows if he has said it in print, please tell me!

¹⁴ Hebrews 10:25

The Word is Near You: Scripture's Call to Discipleship

It really is as simple and profoundly demanding as that.

A Prayer:

Loving God,

What you call us to is both simple and demanding.

Our spirits are willing, but our bodies are weak.

In your mercy, grant us a thirst to know you through your scriptures.

In your kindness, grant us companions on the journey.

In your mercy, hear our prayer,

that we may faithfully love you,

and worthily magnify your holy name through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

We ask these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit –

Word without end,

Amen.