

D.I.S.C.I.P.L.E.S.H.I.P.

by Karl Bastian

D = DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP

*“And He walks with me and He talks with me;
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there;
None other has ever known.”*

Every notice that Jesus’ primary method of discipleship was based upon relationships? Jesus didn’t establish schools, write curriculum, or host seminars. While He certainly did teach the masses—He disciplined in relationship with those who were close to Him, and it was THOSE disciples who turned the world upside down after He left them.

As I look back over some twenty plus years of professional children’s ministry and many more years of just life ministry, it is those I disciplined relationally who I see producing the greatest fruit. They are ones in Bible college, becoming missionaries, and going into vocational or volunteer ministry. While I am NOT assuming or claiming any credit for their godly choices, I am saying that being disciplined played a part in their spiritual formation.

If you want to be a discipler of children, it is no secret that I recommend **DiscipleLand** and *My Awesome Adventure* to disciple children, but the first thing you need is NOT curriculum—it is to build some relationships with kids that are deeper than the educational or “fun” level.

It may just be that some of your best disciples you never formally “discipled” through printed lessons—you just walked with them and became a part of their spiritual journey.

Whether you lead an entire children’s ministry with hundreds of children or teach a small class or volunteer in a club with a small group—pray through your kids and ASK GOD TO SHOW YOU A CHILD YOU CAN HAVE A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH. Become their friend, not just their leader or teacher.

Jesus is my Master, my Lord, my Redeemer, my Savior, my Creator and my Guide, but best of all He is my Friend—and it is that relationship that spurs on my spiritual growth. You may be many things to the kids in your ministry, but when you become their friend, you begin to truly impact their spiritual walk.

What does a friendship with a child look like?

- You know their name
- You know about their family
- You have some common interests
- You pray for them
- You look for them
- You ask them relational questions
- You get together with them
- You remember their important dates
- You love them unconditionally

Take some time and think through the kids God has brought into your life—is there one or two that you could pour your life in to? A few you could become a friend to? That you could disciple intentionally? The impact on their life is indescribable!

GO FOR IT! What are you waiting for?

I = IDENTIFY POTENTIAL DISCIPLES

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” —Matthew 4:19

Have you ever invited someone to be discipled? If you truly want to be a discipler, you must understand that discipleship is not something that happens by accident. Your disciples are not hidden throughout the kids you minister to, they are children you can name. Yes, a true discipler can name their disciples. They have intentionally chosen to disciple someone as a follower of Christ.

The way I discovered this is almost embarrassing.

To explain I have to back up a bit—all the way to high school. But on a Sunday evening in high school I heard a missionary preach who, unbeknownst to me at the time, would one day be my father-in-law! But during his slide show I saw a picture of his daughter and was inspired to write her an encouraging letter. She was encouraged, and encouraged me by her letter back. Soon we were “pen pals” until I became so encouraged I desired to come meet her in person!

Upon graduation from high school, and after writing back and forth with this “MK” for two years I asked her father, via mail, if I could come to the Philippines during the summer for a mission trip. Perhaps he saw through my ulterior motive, but at any rate, he asked me to get a year of Bible college first. I figured this was better than working for him for seven years and getting her sister. So I agreed.

A year later, never wavering in my quest to come to the Philippines and meet my pen-pal, I wrote him again and since I met his requirement, he allowed me to come.

So what does this romantic love story have to do with Discipleship? I thought you'd never ask!

I'd been there only a few days when I had my first meeting with my supervising pastor. (My pen-pal's dad, who, by the way, is over six feet tall) Perhaps he was just challenging me, or testing me, or starting my eight weeks tough as "missionary training" but he asked me:

"So, you've been here nearly a week, how many young men are you discipling?"

I was stunned and confused. But, of course, I couldn't admit it, not to the man whose daughter I had a growing affection for, so I stuttered and answered, "Well, none yet, but I hope to soon." He answered, "Good, by next week I'd like you to be discipling at least three young men." I agreed. Except I had no idea what he was talking about!

Here I was, a pastor's son, and a student at one of the leading Bible colleges in the world, but when asked if I was discipling I was at a loss! So I ran to my "girlfriend" (though not officially so yet) and said, "Your dad wants me to be discipling three boys by next week! What do I do?" She was no help. She simply answered, "Well, just do it." Again, I couldn't admit that I had no idea what they were talking about! How did I tell this girl I was hoping to woo that I didn't know what "discipleship" meant?

I was stuck. Discipleship was a word I heard and used a lot, but when confronted with being asked to actually do it I was stumped.

Well, while perhaps not the most noble of motivations, my desire to impress both a girl and her dad gave me the courage to walk up to a pair of young men after a mid-week service and blurt out the words, "Would you like to be disciplined?" I was scared they would ask me what I meant! But instead, they simply said "Yes!" Then *they led me* to the bookstore at the back of the sanctuary and asked me to help them choose a study book to go through. Next *they asked me* when would be a good time to meet. (They were unknowingly teaching me how to be a discipler!)

Soon we were meeting regularly, and once I was with them and reading the Bible and discussing, I was fine! My years of experience as a Christian and my knowledge as Bible student made the job easy—all I was missing was the intentionality. I had all the experience and knowledge I needed to be a discipler, but I had never actually put it to work in another individual's life!

There are many Christians who are ready to be disciplers who never take that step to become one by simply asking someone if they would like to be disciplined.

How do you choose kids to disciple? I like to say, "look to the edges of spiritual development."

On one end are kids who you aren't sure are genuinely followers of Christ yet, or at best are "saved" but not really that active or enthusiastic about their faith. By discipling them YOU could make the difference on whether they go through life as merely a Christian or a devoted follower of Christ!

On the other end are the kids who seem to have everything going for them spiritually. They come from strong Christian homes and may even have parents in the ministry. (Yes! Disciple PK's!!) They actually are key disciples because they need what they are hearing in the home to be confirmed and validated outside the home. Just because dad is the pastor doesn't mean they will be on-fire for God. In fact, as you may know, often the opposite is true because it is either expected of them, or because they see their dad's human and failing side, they can have doubts. You can be an instrumental part of firming up and strengthening an already strong foundation.

But also look for kids in tough situations. Kids in a single-parent home. Kids who are ill, or have some other family challenges. I've disciplined kids whose parents were going through a divorce, or who had a parent dying of cancer. Or who is getting in trouble at school. Discipling allows you to meet with them with another reason – but the issues they are facing will come up, but in a safer more comfortable way than saying, "lets go out and talk about your mom's cancer" or "lets talk about your parents divorce."

Discipleship allows you to focus on the basics of the Christian life and allows the child to bring up the other issues in their life as they feel comfortable and as they relate to the topics of prayer, trust, obedience, etc.

SO NOW WHAT?

Prayerfully try to identify a child you could disciple. Is there a child you know that is going through a hard time? That shows great potential for God? Who seems to lack serious interest in their faith? Who you would like to have an impact on?

I promise you—if you pray and ask God to show you a child He would like you to disciple, that is a prayer request HE WILL ANSWER! Then you have to take that next step—asking the parents and then the child, if you can disciple them.

You will feel weird and awkward and silly, but please know—that is spiritual warfare! No parent has ever told me “no” and no child has ever not enjoyed getting together and talking about the Bible, God and their faith.

So what are you waiting for? Who are YOU going to disciple?

Let me warn you—discipling children will become the most rewarding part of your ministry and will have the longest lasting results. It worked for Jesus, it will work for you too!

S = SCRIPTURE MEMORY IS KEY

Scripture memory is out of style these days. Perhaps it is because it's hard and we are a culture that likes everything easy. Maybe we are just too busy to memorize. Some even try to discard it as rote repetition that is considered less effective than comprehension and perhaps even harmful. Many today contend that Scripture memory is not effective because it doesn't encourage thinking and therefore doesn't impact the heart.

I agree! I agree that if ALL we did was rote memory, we'd be bad off! But to dismiss Scripture memory on the basis that if ALL we did was rote memory is to push a beneficial spiritual discipline to its extreme and then reject it as though the extreme is all it offers.

Let me suggest three reasons I believe Scripture memory is essential to discipleship:

1) Let's start with the biblical basis of Scripture memory.

- Jesus knew the word of God and was able to drive away Satan when tempted (Matthew 4:1-11).
- King David clearly saw that knowing the word of God was the key to purity (Psalm 119:9-11).
- Paul says that the word is a sword in your armour against the devil's schemes (Ephesians 6:13-18).
- God's word in your heart keeps your feet from slipping (Psalm 37:28-31).

Scripture is FILLED with the benefits of God's Word and value of knowing it deeply. Did you know that in the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, every single one of the 176 verses is about God's Word? That ought to tell us something!

2) I can also offer personal experience. As a child, I memorized a LOT of scripture. Did I understand it all? Of course not. But it gave to such a broad and rich understanding of scripture that deepened as I got older. I have memorized hundreds of verses, many chapters and two books of the Bible and can personally attest to the way God uses that knowledge to help me walk with Him, understand His Word, prepare to teach, witness and just know how to think and reflect on God. It

impacts my prayers constantly. I can't tell you how many times when praying the Word of God just flows and helps me express my love for God and awe at who He is.

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.

—1 Chronicles 29:11

3) Lastly, I'd like to offer an explanation that I often use when people are critical of Scripture memory or try to explain it away as a waste of time, or as something only for children, or even pointless for kids. I call it “The Alphabet Argument.”

I have a two year old son who is learning the alphabet. He is learning to recognize and say the letters of the alphabet. Do they have much meaning to him? No. Does he truly understand what they are and how they are to be used? Of course not. Should I not have him memorize the letters until he can truly appreciate them, understand them, and use them properly? Absolutely not! I would actually stunt his mental growth and handicap his future use of the English language and hinder his ability to creatively express himself in our language. So he learned meaningless LETTERS for now. But soon that knowledge will help him recognize and use WORDS. Those words, before I know it, will enable him to read SENTENCES and then (and I can't wait!) he will be able to CREATE HIS OWN stories.

QUESTION: If I asked you to close your eyes and tell me the LETTERS I have been using, could you? No. You are not reading “letters.” You aren't even reading “words” or “sentences.” You are reading THOUGHTS and the sentences, words and letters are just the vehicle to communicate them to you. *The SAME is true of God's Word!*

God's Word is alive and active! (recognize the verse?) God's word is not the sum of sentences, words or letters—it is the Power of God! But it is communicated via words.

You see? When kids (or adults!) memorize Scripture—they are getting the “spiritual alphabet” by which they will form broader spiritual thoughts and ideas. If I only taught my little boy half of the alphabet—imagine the impact it would have on him? He needs all the letters! Imagine the impact when you only know a little of the Bible from memory? You are limited and will be spiritually frustrated just as my little boy would be if he didn't first learn the alphabet.

All this to say—you do your disciples a disservice if you don't lead them and encourage them to memorize Scripture. Should it all be rote memory? Of course not. Try to explain

and help them understand, but ultimately the Holy Spirit will do that, and a lot better than you ever could.

Scripture memory ought to be a regular part of your spiritual journey and a vital part of your discipling process. Years later these kids will be thankful to you, just as I am to Helen Reed, Margret Bramble, Charlie Hann and the other adults in my childhood who challenged and encouraged me to memorize God's Word!

C = CHALLENGE TO THE "NEXT LEVEL"

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. —1 Thessalonians 5:11

The purpose of discipleship is not to merely pass on spiritual or biblical information. It is to guide and stimulate spiritual GROWTH in those you disciple. What you *know* is not as important as what you *do*, and what you do is not as important as who you *are*. As a discipler, one of the most critical aspects of your job is to challenge your disciplee to the next level in their walk with Christ.

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. —1 Thessalonians 5:14

You are not asking them to be a Super Christian, or to be perfect—but you are challenging them to move ahead, to progress from where they currently are. How do you do that?

The first key is knowing where they are currently and then challenge them to move to the next realistic level. How often do they read their Bible, honestly? If it is once or twice a week—encouraging daily devotions may be the worst thing you can do. It may lead to a sense of failure or discouragement. But if you can encourage them to one extra day a week than they are currently doing, you have progress. Offer to use a phone call, email or text message to remind them. And let them hold you accountable, too!

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. —2 Timothy 4:2

If they have not memorized much Scripture, something I've already stated is critical, then work on something together. A psalm perhaps. If they have memorized a lot, then challenge them to memorize a book! I would have never memorized the book of James if my discipler hadn't said, "I think you are ready to discover the power of memorizing an entire book." So I did, and have led many others in memorizing books since then.

What about witnessing? We all know we should be witnessing to the lost—it's tough! So we need to be challenged. Ask who their unsaved friends are. Help them think of ways to witness, starting with little ways. Encourage some cold turkey witnessing to strangers. I know that had a profound impact on me early in my Christian walk.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. —Proverbs 27:17

There are many aspects to the Christian faith. Whatever your lesson is on—make it personal. Get out of the theory and into real life. Ask them to tell you how they are REALLY doing in that area. If it is sensitive, then ask them to write it privately and seal it in an envelop. Then challenge them to think of something they need to do or change to see improvement. Have them open the envelope in a month or year and see how things have improved.

One of the things I like to do with the guys I am in a discipling relationship with, or more often, a mutual accountability relationship with, is to ask the guys how they are doing with the Three W's:

- Walk—their walk with God
- Wife—their marriage and family
- Work—their job and/or ministry

We give each other a number from 1 to 10, one being terrible and ten being perfect. As you might guess, no one ever gives a ten! This enables us to be honest without giving any personal or private info, though as we explain our "3" or "6.5" often we find ourselves willing and able to share what is going on in our walk, with our wife, or in our work and how it is impacting our life.

With kids, you can ask the same 1-10 question at a child's level. How is your relationship with your parents? Your friends? How's it going at school?

BUT HERE IS THE KEY: you have to ask, "What would it take to see that number go up?" Press for specific action steps they could take to see improvement. Things they can do, not things they hope will change. Then follow up to encourage them to succeed and to celebrate improvements and success.

It is a fact of our nature that we don't improve unless we are challenged and then held accountable. The good news you can provide that critical help to those you disciple and even those you just care about.

So don't just teach, become an encourager, in fact, a challenger. God will use you to help others in your life go to the "Next Level" in their spiritual journey.

...But let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. —Hebrews 10:25

I = INVEST IN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Investing in the spiritual development of children is the best investment possible on this earth. There is no greater way to see a return on your investment of time and resources. I used this theme in a recruiting brochure once in my church that featured an “INVESTMENT GUIDE” that featured the phrase “Investing in Children Yields Rich Dividends Over the Short and Long Range.” The purpose of that recruiting campaign was to encourage adults to see volunteering in the same light as they view their financial investment. It asked, “Let us help you develop your own personal diversified spiritual investment portfolio.” Our goal was to guide individuals toward thinking strategically about children’s ministry (aka “investment”), volunteering in several areas (aka “diversified”) and to consider the long range benefits of their service (aka “portfolio”). Instead of the mind-set, “I already serve in nursery, I’m covered” we asked them to consider “in what other way can I invest in kids.” This doesn’t mean we over work our volunteers—it means there is more than one way to invest in kids, many aren’t in the classroom! One of the options on the response form, oops, excuse me, the “Investment Response Form” was to inquire about being a discipler of children.

Let me tell you—please hear me—the *BEST investment you can make in children’s ministry is to become a discipler of children.* Whether you are the children’s pastor/director or volunteer in the trenches of weekly ministry, there is nothing that will be as fulfilling or as effective as discipling individual kids. *Nothing.*

I’ve planned and pulled off countless Vacation Bible Schools, Kids Crusades, Backyard Bible Blasts, Fun Fairs, Water Wars, Overnighters and taught well over 1000 Kids Church services (conservative estimate!) not to mention special events I’ve been hired to do at other churches or on the mission field. I’ve been to many more meetings, outings, and done more than my fair share of “child care” situations I redeemed by making them more than mere child care. But where do I see the most fruit in over thirty years of ministry (only half of which was as a vocational minister)? *In the children I disciplined.*

The kids I intentionally disciplined are the ones in Bible college. The children I disciplined are the ones I see getting baptized (one just this past Sunday, now a senior in high school). The boys I spent time with one on one are now camp counselors, dating Christian girls, serving the Lord on mission trips (I get their support raising letters every year) and by far more “on fire” for God than most young people.

Let me be clear—I am NOT taking credit for any of these kids spiritual passion, much is owed to the parents

and others who invested in them, and they deserve a lot of credit too for their choices. But I do find it encouraging and telling that so many of the kids I disciplined are the ones I see the most fruit in. It has been demonstrated in several studies that the #1 common denominator in children who stay committed to their Christian faith as adults are those who had an adult, other than a parent, show an interest in their spiritual development as a young person. So it doesn’t surprise me that the kids I disciplined are doing so well now that they are no longer kids.

But I also see the most fruit from those Jesus disciplined. *Perhaps He was on to something.*

Like Jesus, we must minister to the masses—but don’t miss out on the power of focusing on individuals while you’re at it. If you aren’t focusing on any individual kids, you are robbing yourself of some of the most fulfilling experiences in ministry, and you are robbing those kids of a great advantage in their spiritual journey.

HOW DO YOU INVEST IN KIDS?

1. The most important thing you can invest is your TIME! Talking to kids one on one is critical. They will remember those conversations for years—and especially when they are struggling as teenagers. Take kids out to eat and on outings and talk about spiritual things. The common thought that just hanging out is enough is wrong. You don’t need to preach at them, but talk about things that matter.
2. Write kids letters where you give advice, share what you see in them you admire. Compliment them, describe your hopes for their future with gentle encouragement to keep walking with the Lord.
3. Invest in resources for the kids you are discipling or focusing on. When you get a discipling book to go through, like Awesome Adventure, you are communicating their value to you. (My wife and I wrote Awesome Adventure for discipling kids and used it our ‘home made’ version for years before DiscipleLand published it and made it the attractive tool it is now.)
4. You can also buy kids a helpful Bible. “Kids Bibles” are great, but it may surprise you that the Bible I have bought for most of the kids I disciple is a Thomas Chain Reference Bible. When I received mine from my dad I was told it was “for adults” but that he could tell I was ready for a serious Bible. It inspired me to get serious about studying the Bible, not just reading it. When you give a child a study Bible you honor them as well as equip them.
5. Invest in kids in little ways—treating them out to eat. Getting them little gifts to reward them along the way. (I am not talking about bribes, I’m referring to gifts when they

do a good job, there is a difference!) Showing you care by investing in their life communicates more than you can imagine. I bought a kid a new basketball, a new jacket, or a toy they collected. Spending my money to say “I love you” and “I know your world” is money well spent.

6. You can also invest in kids by helping them in other areas of struggle besides just the “spiritual” because *all of life is spiritual!* I have a study system I learned in college that can take any struggling student and turn them into a successful student in one quarter. I have helped so many student *first* with their school work and then with their walk with God.

Consider the kids in your life who need some focused attention, and ask yourself, “How can I invest in this child?” God will give you the answer. Your job, then, is to put your money, your time, or your effort where His heart is.

The results will become the highlight of your ministry.

P = PRAY FOR AND WITH YOUR DISCIPLES

Prayer is one of those things we often talk about more than we actually do! Just to make sure we don’t do that right now, lets both STOP, RIGHT NOW, and pray before going forward. Go for it. Ask God to open your heart to how Prayer could transform and empower your discipling!

(Pssst! you should be praying right now!)

Okay, welcome back! Few Christians, if any, would argue the point that the most important thing we can do for our children is to pray for them... but does our action match our words? If you devotion to children and the cause of Christ were measured ONLY by your prayer life—what would the conclusion be? My goal is not to motivate by guilt, but to challenge you to evaluate how important prayer is in practise in your ministry to children.

When it comes to praying for our disciples—those kids who we are intentionally investing in spiritually—there are two important aspects to praying for them. Obviously, we ought to be praying FOR them, but we also should pray WITH them. Let’s look at both and why they are important.

PRAYING FOR YOUR STUDENTS

While I could provide a long list of verses about prayer, let me focus on just one and make a few points.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
—Philippians 4:6

This concise verse contains some of the best teaching on prayer and it is very applicable to praying for the children we are ministering to.

1. “Do not be anxious.” There is a lot that can worry us about children in today’s world. The dangers to both the minds, bodies, and souls can be terrifying to us who love them. There is great spiritual warfare for their hearts and minds, and without spiritual power and intervention, most kids will end up choosing the “broad road” that leads to destruction. But here God tells us, the answer is not to be anxious, it is to pray! If we truly care about the children in our lives, we ought to be praying for them, and often! It is the single most powerful thing we can do to prevent the things that make us anxious for them. Make a list of the kids you care about, and pray for them by name. Ask God to protect them, to challenge them, to draw them to Himself and to give them a curiosity for the Word of God and a hunger for righteousness. Pray for courage to withstand temptation and patience in the midst of trials. Pray that they would choose friends who draw them closer to God and not away. And prayer for their parents who have such a challenging God. A prayer for parents is a blessing to their children!

2. “By prayer and petition.” I’ve always found it fascinating that in this verse God separates “prayer” and “petition.” To many people, prayer = petition. All they ever do when they pray is ask for stuff. God desires for us to make requests of Him, as a Father, he delights in giving good things to His children, but notice “petition” is mentioned secondary to “prayer”—which is simply communication and fellowship with God. Make sure that you are spending time getting to know the heart of God, not just asking Him for things you want—even good things. The first thing God wants is YOU!

3. “With Thanksgiving.” This is a powerful key to prayer! Too often we pray and “hope” God will answer. That isn’t faith. When we pray “with thanksgiving” we are asking in anticipation of what God will do. Are we manipulating God? Far from it! But we are demonstrating faith that He will do that is best in the situation. When a child gives a list of Christmas Wishes to a parent, they don’t think for a second they won’t get something—or that they will be disappointed on that morning—but they don’t always get what they ask for. They DO get what Mom and Dad decide is best for them at that age, and probably what they can afford. The good thing with God is, He can afford anything! So ask with thanksgiving! You can even say in your prayer of petition, “God I thank you already for how you are going to answer this prayer because I know your love for this child is perfect and exceeds even what I can imagine. Thank you for loving me, for hearing me, and for answering my prayer!” No need to wait around and see “if” God answers—if you pray according to His will—He WILL answer! So thank Him in advance!

4. “Present your requests to God.” We do need to actually present them to God! This may seem like pointing out the

obvious. But I know as a father, there are many things I am willing to do with or for my son that I only do if he actually asks me. Part of it is that God doesn't force Himself on us, but it is also that He wants to see what we would like to see Him do. If we don't ask, we are likely not to notice or thank Him even if He does it. But when we ask, we'll see it when it happens! I can't help wondering what things I've missed out on in life from both my earthly and heavenly fathers simply because I didn't bother to ask! So present your requests to God TODAY! What are you waiting for?

PRAYING WITH YOUR STUDENTS

It is also important to pray WITH your students, and I don't mean just opening in prayer. Skip that if it is nothing but a formality! Don't be flippant with God. Remember Who it is you are talking to! When you pray with your students, it helps teach them how to prayer. It humbles us as we acknowledge Who we are following. It shows we care as we pray for them. And you can rejoice together when God answers prayer.

A few tips:

- Ask your students for prayer requests. Your job is not just to teach them biblical knowledge, it is to transform them into a disciple of Jesus.
- WRITE THEM DOWN. Keep a journal, use a note card in your Bible, your smartphone, something so that you are reminded to prayer later.
- Pray for them throughout the week, you may want to call or e-mail to check in on them. It will surprise them and show you truly are concerned for them.
- Follow up by asking about them later—this proves you really prayed and really care! If you say you will pray about a sick grandma and never ask how she is doing, did you really prayer? Did you really care? How could you still be praying if you don't even know if she is alive still?
- Share your own concerns with them, so they see you are real. You don't need to share your deepest struggles, but demonstrate your own dependence on God by sharing the things you are currently praying about. As they see God answer your prayers, they will share in the rejoicing and be all the more eager to make prayer a part of their life.
- Pray for others besides yourselves. Pray for their parents. Ask them how you can pray for their parents. Kids who are upset with their parents will be forced to see their parents in a new light—as other people with problems, worries, concerns and struggles. If they talk about kids they are having issues with, what a perfect opportunity to demonstrate “praying for our enemies!”

Don't just give prayer lip service—make it an essential part of your discipling and you will see God work because he loves to answer prayer!

L = LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY

There isn't a discipler who wouldn't say they love their students and what more than anything for them to feel loved and KNOW that they are loved, unconditionally, just as they are. But what does it truly mean to show unconditional love? And how do you show love like this? It starts by understanding how God loves us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. —Romans 5:6-8

Think about it—God did not wait for you to get your act together, to start being good, until you started being religious, to save you. You save you while you were a mess and completely undeserving of his attention, let along his mercy and grace. He loved you when you were unlovable. And he STILL LOVES YOU no matter what. Years ago I saw a T-shirt my friend Steve Greer was selling at CPC. It said: *NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, NO MATTER WHAT YOU SAY, GOD LOVES YOU.*

I still have my T-shirt (I think that was around 1995 when I got it!) and every time I put it on it makes me smile. Whew. God loves ME, of all people. Pretty amazing stuff. OK, so God loves me, after you get over your shock, you might ask, but what's that have to do with your disciples?

EVERYTHING.

Just as you disappoint the Lord regularly (I was being nice by not saying every day!) so your students, or disciples, will disappoint you. They will leave church. They will take up smoking. They will get pregnant. They will get into witchcraft. They will be victims of this sinful world. They will shock you, disappoint you and at time break your heart. Many others, perhaps even most, will escape much of this in large part BECAUSE you disciplined them. But there will be some who disappoint you. And when they do, all you need to do to keep loving them, believing in them, and investing in them...is to look in the mirror.

If God hasn't given up on you, there is no reason to give up on those you are discipling. And if you think you're pretty good—you may have a rude awakening coming your way. We all will fail the Lord in a wide variety of ways. But the good news is, HE will never cast you off. Friends may. Christians will. But the God who laid there unflinching when the nails were pounded in, will never give up on you!

DISCIPLESHIP IS NOT ABOUT MAKING PERFECT KIDS, IT IS ABOUT INTRODUCING THEM TO A PERFECT LOVE THAT WILL NOT FAIL THEM.

In fact, many kids will never truly believe in the Goodness of God until after they have failed and experienced grace and forgiveness and unconditional love. From you.

So teach them doctrine. Have them memorize Scripture. Help them understand the Bible and navigate it with confidence. Show them how to live a godly life. But above all else, let them know that you love them and that there is NOTHING they can do to damage that love. Friendship, perhaps. Trust, certainly. But love? Never.

If you are serious about discipling kids, your love WILL be put to the test. But I figure, I test God's love every day, and He always passes with flying colors. So I will do the same with those who disappoint me, hurt me, or fall short of what I hope or expect of them. I will forgive and love and let God do His work in His time.

Just as He is doing with me.

E = EXPECT MUCH, GET MUCH

When you are discipling a young person, they will only rise as far as you expect them to. This doesn't mean they won't fall short of your hopes and dreams, they often will. But I've never seen a student exceed my expectations. In short, "Expect Little, Get Little; Expect Much, Get Much."

Most young people have a low opinion of themselves, you can be their greatest encourager to exceed the expectations of everyone in their life, except you. If you think more of them than they think of themselves, you can have the power to help lift them to the next level on their Christian journey! You can challenge them to surprise those who don't think they can excel. And for those who are achievers and confident in their abilities, you can challenge them to even greater levels of accomplishment.

As a young man, I was given a passion for Scripture memory by my junior department superintendent, Helen Reed, who is now with the Lord. She had a chart that seemed to wrap around the room, and with her "I think you can do it" whispered in my ear, my goal in life was to get a star in every square by memorizing all the verses. For those who criticize external motivations for children, all I can say is I'm glad my teachers believed in them! Or I would have never memorized the hundreds of verses I did nor would I have the grasp of Scripture I have today, even if I have lost most of the references and can't "quote" them all word for word any longer. So when it came to Scripture memory, I knew that was an area of strength and that I had memorized more of the Bible than most people by the time I got into high school. As a result, I either already knew the verses my class was studying, or I could learn it quickly with little

work. While my high school discipler, Ralph Hines, could have just complimented me on my knowledge of Scripture and focused on challenging me elsewhere, instead, he was barely impressed and said once, "I'll be impressed when you memorize an entire book. That's what the early believers and scholars did, and it will make a profound impact on you." He started assigning me chapters to memorize and often hinted that the next level was memorizing an entire book of the Bible. It was all the challenge I needed. That thought stuck in my head for several years until finally in my freshman year of college I memorized the book of James. And a profound impact it indeed made leading me to memorize other books and chunks of Scripture.

My point is NOT about "me"—it is about the need to expect more of our students and challenge them to the next level in their spiritual walk. Scripture memory is just one area, and it is a knowledge area—there are many other arena worth challenging, especially those that deal with "real life." Witnessing to a friend, stepping up to a position of leadership, submitting to their controlling parents, reconciling with a friend or forgiving someone who hurt them, taking on a challenging project, or starting a ministry. There have been many times in my life when God has brought people into my life to challenge me. They expected more of me than I expected of myself, and with renewed confidence I took steps of faith and action that I otherwise probably wouldn't have. *YOU can be that person in the lives of those you disciple!*

Prayerfully seek how you can challenge them. Do not accept poor performance or a mediocre walk with Christ. Learn their skills and passions and then expect them to step out in faith and trust God to do in and through them what they otherwise would never think of doing. You can share in the fruit that their life will produce! Do not merely seek to get through discipleship materials or to walk with them in their journey. God may have placed you in their life specifically to prod them toward His will for their life! What an awesome and humbling responsibility! Do it with gentleness, but firmness; with sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, but with boldness.

Dare them to go where they have never gone before. That is what truly brings excitement to the Christian life!

S = STICK WITH IT

Discipleship is not an event—it is a process, and in the context of discipling people, it is important to view it in terms of relationship not as a project.

EXPECT TO BE DISAPPOINTED AND LET DOWN.
And do not give up!

How many times have YOU disappointed those who believed in you? Who were investing in you? Who had high hopes for you? Scripture is full of “second chance” stories. What if God had given up on Adam? or Moses? or David? or Peter? or Paul?

or You?

When you make the decision to disciple someone, you are not making a decision to get someone through a book or to help them memorize a set number of verses or to graduate from a certain program, even though those may be worthy goals in a discipleship program. But remember, Jesus established no program when He said to “go into all the world and make disciples.” In fact, the Bible, as we know it today, wasn’t even available yet!

What did they have? A relationship with Christ! And the power of the Holy Spirit and a mandate to spread the Gospel, walk in obedience and to live by the Word. We have awesome tools to help train and educate—but never allow these tools to *become discipleship* in your heart and mind! They are a means toward the end—they are not the end!

Tools will fail—but discipleship won’t. Genuine discipleship, based on relationship and friendship, that stands the test of time, and that endures through times of test and challenge will product spiritual fruit!

As you meet with your disciples for Bible study and prayer, make sure that you show a genuine interest in their walk with God, what is going on in their life and family, and their personal struggles, doubts and questions, not just whether they have done their “work.” And if they don’t do their “homework” or disappoint you with their life choices, do not chastise them as though they have broken your rules or disappointed you because they didn’t live up to your standards, but show genuine concern for them and seek to understand. Allow them space to struggle, be willing to listen, to forgive, and to accept them unconditionally. And never write them off or give up on them. Even if the discipling needs to come to an end, let them know you will never stop praying for them and hoping for the best for them, and will welcome them back when they are ready.

Children need to know that you *believe in them*, not that you believe they can finish a book or program. Most often, they will finish the book or program, but when they don’t let it go, and stick with *them*. Keep in touch, pray for them, and let them know your friendship and love is unconditional and has no expiration. I’ve had children who never finished going through the Awesome Adventure book with me for one reason or another but that I still have a relationship with even as they are now adults and they will still say, “Pastor Karl disciplined me as a child.” I’ll sometimes think to myself, “I wonder if they remember we never finished the book?” and then I catch myself, that the book wasn’t what mattered, it was the relationship that mattered and the intentional interest I took in the spiritual development that mattered and made the difference.

So matter what happens, stick with it! Galatians 6:9 promises: “*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up!*”

H = HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE

“It’s not what you expect, it’s what you inspect that matters.”

That may be a line from business, but it’s true when it comes to discipleship too. Not only is holding our disciples accountable important, they truly desire it. We think that those we disciple don’t want to be “checked up” on—but the reality is, if we don’t, what that really says is, “I don’t really care how you are doing spiritually.”

When you meet with your disciples, be sure to check up on how they are doing. Ask how their walk with God is doing. How are their relationships with their parents, siblings, teachers, friends. (Those often mirror their walk with God.) How are their spiritual disciplines going. If they are struggling with something, feel free to set aside the lesson and deal with what they are struggling with. A lesson is never more important than a real struggle going on in their heart or life—that is real discipleship!

Remember, you are not trying to create a smart Christian—you are trying to make a disciple, someone like Jesus!

But accountability, is not only about while you are in a discipling relationship—it is about long term, over the course of a lifetime! Long after you have finished a book or a biblical course, you want to see them continue to walk with God, and that takes long-term accountability. But how do you find out how children are doing spiritually long term without feeling like you are being nosy or like a pesky adult?

YOU ASK FOR PERMISSION AHEAD OF TIME.

When you are meeting for discipleship and are talking about prayer or quiet-times, and having an open and honest conversation about the challenges of being regular in prayer of time with God—that is when you ask, “Would you like me to help you be more regular in your prayer life or quiet time?” I have never gotten a “no” for an answer. But take it a step farther.

Don’t assume that your discipling relationship is just for the here and now. You are beginning a relationship and God may use years from now. What you invest today may not truly be cashed in for years to come. In fact, you need to build a doorway into the heart of the children you disciple that you can enter later. A door that they don’t even realize may be needed. They will let you build it, and later, they will let you walk through it, for they will remember when they built it with you.

“What about a year from now?”

“What about when you are a teenager and you don’t seem interested in spiritual things, would it be OK if I asked you about your walk with God?”

“What if you get irritated with me?”

“What if you get mad at me?”

“What if you tell me to leave you alone and bug off?”

“What if I see you straying from God and slipping into a sinful life style? What would you like me to do then?”

“How persistent would you like me to be?”

“How often would you like me to check in on you?”

“What if I dropped in on you twenty years from now and discovered your life was radically different, would you give me an hour to talk about your spiritual life and what has happened? Would you give me some time to listen and pray with me and open God’s Word?”

“Will you give me your word on that?”

If you get permission while they are young, you’ll be able to ask tough questions later and they will let you. Even with their head down, with no eye contact, they will welcome your questions. I’ve even had teens come to me and say, “Pastor Karl, you need to ask me some of those questions you said you’d ask me some day.” They want to be asked, and they want to be known, even when they fail. Because ultimately, they

WANT TO SUCCEED! *So hold the kids you love accountable!*

I = IMITATE CHRIST FOR THEM

“Imitation is the Highest Form of Flattery.”

One of the things my father often said to me was, “Son, I want you to watch my life. When you see my acting like Christ—do as I do. When you see my not acting like Christ, please don’t follow in my footsteps, but learn from my mistakes.” He never pretended to be a perfect father—he was real. He was my primary discipler, as every father ought to be. (Duet. 6) I had other disciplers who did the same thing. They coached me through how Jesus would want me to respond in different situations, and they opened their lives to me sharing with me their own struggles and obstacles and the choices they were facing, and how they were going to address them, from Scripture, through prayer—even asking me at times what I thought God would have them do! Asking *me*, the disciple!

Once I had a youth pastor take me to the grocery store with him, just as a fun errand and when we got out to the parking lot and I started to help him unload the car he yelled, “STOP!” I looked at him bewildered, and then he said, “Shall we pray?” I looked at him puzzled as he folded his hands dramatically, bowed his head, and prayed over the cart, “Lord, bless this food which I shall be eating over the next two weeks. Amen.” Then he looked up and said, “There! Now I don’t have to pray at my meals!” While I was sure it was just a joke—I did notice later at several meals at his house, we never stopped for prayer and I started to wonder if maybe he was serious back at that parking lot prayer! Funny how even jokes can turn into discipling moments.

Hebrews 13:7 tells us to *“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”* Just as we are to look for leaders to imitate—those we are discipling will be *looking to us!*

We need to be bold enough to say to them, that’s O.K.! Paul did so!

Look in 1 Corinthians 4:16-17 where Paul writes, **“Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.”** He is saying that how he lives MATCHES what he teaches.

That is a powerful claim and one we need to take to heart! Does what we teach match the way we live? That is why it is so important that we LIVE what we teach! Romans 2:21 asks bluntly, “You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?”

In fact, James lays out a stern warning in James 3:1, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*”

I don’t say any of this to scare you off from being a discipler—in the very next verse James says, “*We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*” He, and God know, we are going to make mistakes, and their grace for a repentant sinner every time—the point rather, is to take our role as a teacher and discipler *seriously*.

It is to WORK HARD at BEING an imitator of Christ before we set ourselves up as one that our students will be imitating. We are duplicating ourselves, for better or for worse! I once dropped off a children’s ministry intern back at the Moody Bible Institute campus and as he went off across the campus riding a mini-bike he was borrowing, wearing a yo-yo holster and had a puppet sticking out of his backpack I joked to my wife, “Am I really helping that boy, or turning him into a clown?” There was no mistaking the fact he was becoming more like me every day! Every one could tell who was discipling him. He’s since become more his “own man” in ministry—but the point is, your disciplers WILL imitate you. *So be sure YOU are imitating Christ!*

P = PROVIDE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

“Life is the best laboratory.”

We don’t disciple in order to pass on a head full of knowledge. We disciple in order to prepare others for a life of following Jesus! Therefore, it is important during the discipling process to include opportunities for your disciples to put into practice the things they are learning. Don’t think that once they finish learning everything you are teaching them they will “graduate” and then go out and apply it. If you have merely met and read the Bible and talked about godly living as a “concept,” *that* will be the lesson they have learned—that spirituality is something that you sit around and talk about. Your disciples will learn, if not in word, but in example, that Christianity is a matter of *talk* rather than of *action*. No matter what you are studying and learning about, you must look for real life areas in their life, or in your church or community, where they can apply what they are learning.

If you are learning about how to study the Bible, they must start to study the Bible—and allow what they are studying to impact their life in some practical ways. It may even mean not moving forward to a new topic until

they have seen how God’s Word can impact their life! If you are studying prayer, ask them for some specific things to pray about, and keep them in prayer throughout the discipleship process, noting how God answers prayer. If you are learning about how to witness, make a list of unsaved friends and guide your disciple through some experiences in sharing their faith with some friends or inviting them to a church outreach. Even if they don’t see the results they desire right away, these will be growing experiences. If you are discussing church service, find out if or how they are involved at church. If they aren’t, if possible, get them involved in some capacity at church before moving on to the next lesson. All disciples should be serving in the local church in some capacity. Guiding them through these growing experiences, as part of your discipleship, can be the difference between whether the lessons you teach “stick” long after the time you invest to meet with them.

In addition to practical life application to the lessons you are working through, be sure to be asking what is going on in their lives. Asking for prayer requests is often a way to find out where they need help or guidance. Show them how what you are studying applies to these life situations. Also, be aware of other Kingdom events going on in your community or city that they could take advantage of that could add to the discipling experience. Conferences, seminars, retreats and concerts can all be learning opportunities that can build into your disciples.

Discipleship is more caught than taught, and it is caught along the journey more than it is sitting talking. So invite your disciples to practice what you talk about, and you’ll soon see them having their own “ah ha” moments as they see what you talked about in a discipleship meeting making a big difference when applied to their life.

Soon they will be discipling others and sharing stories of what they learned from you, and the difference it made in their life. That is the disciplers goal! To be a discipler of disciplers! After all, someone disciplined you first and it was after you saw the difference God made in your life that made you decide to become a discipler, wasn’t it? Providing learning opportunities is what takes the concepts and transforms them into real life transformation.