

# Discipling

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] encouraging and comforting and urging. A church that's about discipleship and that takes discipling seriously is a church that recognises that spiritual growth is a lifelong process.

It never stops. John Wesley said that, you know, there's no standing still as a Christian. You must either rise or fall. So which is it going to be? And broadly speaking, what that looks like in practical terms, as Paul captures there, is that churches that take discipleship seriously need to take seriously the importance of encouraging and comforting, but also not being afraid to urge.

You know, that's a challenge. Pablo Casals was a brilliant musician. He lived from 1876 to 1973.

Many regard him as one of the finest cellists who ever lived. When he was 95 years old, he was asked, why did he still practise the cello for six hours every day?

He said, because I think I'm making progress. Growth in discipleship is a lifelong thing. And if we're going to take that seriously, we need to take seriously the importance of the ongoingness of growth.

[ 1 : 3 2 ] Jesus never said, go and make converts. Being a convert is quite easy because it's in the moment, that change. Jesus said, make disciples.

Discipleship is far more complex. That's where the rubber hits the road. That's a lifelong challenge of ongoing growth and transformation throughout our whole lives.

It never stops. So how, in practical terms, can we kind of go about both making disciples and being made into disciples?

What do we find in these words from Paul in Thessalonians? Well, we have these key words. He says that you are to be about the business of encouraging and comforting and also urging.

And interestingly, the word urging there in the Greek means something like being a witness to. Being a witness to God. Coming back to the challenge of the gospel.

[ 2 : 3 1 ] We need both if we're going to grow. So let's just briefly spend a few moments thinking about what that means, what that looks like. Firstly, let's think about the encouragement and the comfort. What that means, what that looks like.

You know, it's really important that we encourage each other. That we say positive things to each other. It's too easy to assume that somebody that we see as doing really well at something, or perhaps we see as really spiritually mature, to think, well, that person doesn't need any more encouragement from me.

Because we all need encouragement. We need to give it. And I think we tend to hold back on that. And yet it's so simple and so easy to do. And I would say it's far better to make the assumption that somebody needs that encouragement than to assume that they don't.

So I want to challenge all of us that the next time, the very next time that even a hint of a thought enters your head, should I perhaps just encourage that person by saying something positive to them about something I've noticed that they've done, or something that I appreciate about them, do it.

What is there to lose? There is far more to be lost by under-encouraging than there is by over-encouraging people. So let's not be afraid to encourage each other.

[ 3 : 4 7 ] Next time that thought enters your head, just don't hesitate. Go straight to it. Either speak to them, phone them, write to them, message them, whatever, but do it. But you know, the other side of that same coin is this challenge of being able to receive words of encouragement.

Now maybe it's a British thing, I don't know. Psychologists cite a number of different reasons why we're not all that good at receiving positive words towards us.

Sometimes it might be that we suspect other people's motives when they're starting to say nice things to us. Perhaps there's a sense of fear that we're going to be rumbled and that it's only a matter of time that they realise actually the positive things they're saying about us, we really don't

deserve those things.

It's probably more likely, I guess, that there's something deep within us, perhaps particularly in terms of Christian faith, that somehow tells us that somehow it's wrong to accept words of praise for somebody because we feel that it's somehow immodest to do so.

But you know, we need encouragement. And that inward urge to bat it away when it comes our way, we need to be really careful in how we handle that.

[ 5 : 06 ] Because it's like if you were to give somebody a gift, they open it up and they bat it away and downplay it and say, oh no, I don't really want that. That's basically what we do when we effectively downplay or bat away somebody's positive words towards us.

Next time somebody encourages you, and I hope they do, and you feel that slight sense of reluctance to accept their words, take a leaf out of the Americans book because they've got it right. They have a brilliant, brilliant way of responding to these things. They just simply say, you're welcome. It's great. Next time somebody says to you a positive thing, don't bat it away, just say, you're welcome and enjoy it.

Because we need encouragement. We need those positive words. If we are to either rise or fall, as Wesley said, if we are to seriously grow, we need to give encouragement and we need to be able to receive encouragement and comfort.

But that's not all that Paul says. Paul talks of the importance and the seriousness of having a culture in churches where we're unafraid to grasp nettles and do that tough talking.

[ 6 : 18 ] We need to be able, willing and prepared to urge one another. If we are going to rise or fall, sometimes there are things that need to be said that may not perhaps feel quite so comfortable.

If we're going to grow, sometimes we need to grasp some nettles. And there may need to be conversations that are hard to say and hard to hear. Now, before I go any further, we've got to be super careful with this.

That phrase, can I say something to you in love? Too often can serve as a prelude to kicking you very hard in the nuts.

It's not a licence to judge or to criticise. I think the key question before we ever go about saying something to somebody or when we listen to something to somebody is this.

Are we trying to help that person to grow? If you're thinking, should I say something to somebody, ask yourself the question, what's your motive? Do you want them to rise or actually deep down inside are you wanting to knock them down?

[ 7 : 37 ] And likewise, when somebody has said something to us that is challenging, before we just take deep offence by it, ask ourselves the question, why is this being said to me? Is it being said because they want to knock me down, they want me to fall, or is it because they want to build me up?

If we are about the business of seriously trying to build one another up, then there may be a time and a place to speak that truth in love.

You know, after the end of the Second World War, one particular commentator had a very, very strong theory that one of the many reasons why Hitler crumbled was simply because he would never, ever, ever listen to those warning him how serious the situation was.

That he simply punished those who brought news to him that he just refused to listen to and didn't want to hear. If we're about the business of not standing still, but helping each other to rise and not fall, we need to be willing to face reality that sometimes tough talking is needed.

We need, as Paul says, to be willing to urge and to be urged. In an interview last year with Robert Peston, some of you may have seen it, Boris Johnson was asked about his beliefs.

[ 9 : 05 ] He said, I'm a very, very bad Christian. And then he went on and said, Christianity is a superb ethical system. Now these sermons are recorded and put online.

I think normally sometime around Sunday afternoon. I'm not sure that Boris Johnson is going to be listening to this this afternoon. He might have just about finished opening all his Father's Day cards by then.

But, Boris, if you are listening, there is an ethical advisor who is always there for us.

But he's far more than an ethical advisor. But seriously, seriously, that concept that I'm a very, very bad Christian, that's something that I do hear people say quite often, different versions of that.

I'm a rubbish Christian. I'm not really a very good Christian. It completely misses the point, if that's what we think, that when we get things wrong, somehow we're a bad Christian.

[ 10 : 23 ] No, we are human beings as Christians, and we get things wrong. What we need is an understanding of what Christian community is, what faith community, what church is, that it's a place to grow.

And that's the reason why, yes, we need to encourage each other, but there are times when we have to have those tough, difficult conversations that people would perhaps rather not have. Because it's only then that we can face reality and grow, whatever that means.

Maybe perhaps we misunderstand what church is about.

The following analogy, which I'm going to finish with now, may help. Think of church as being a bit like a garage. Now, church, sorry, garages, the word garage can mean, well, I think of two broadly different things.

On the one hand, a garage could be a showroom. It could be a place that's just full of really lovely, brand new, shiny cars.

[ 11 : 34 ] You know, to the point where you walk in and you can see your reflection in the tyres. They're shining. Everything about them is absolutely spotless. And everything just smells new and luxurious.

Sadly, that's often the kind of understanding that people have of what church is and of what Christians are meant to be.

Spotless and shining. But then you've got the other meaning of the word garage, which is not a showroom.

It's a place where you take your car to be serviced and fixed. And you wouldn't rock up into a showroom with a car that's got a problem.

You need that other type of garage. As churches, we're in the business of not being a showroom that makes people feel that they're rubbish, bad Christians.

[ 12 : 36 ] We're in the business of fixing and repairing. And in order to fix and to repair and to make new beginnings and fresh starts and to grow and to flourish and to rise and not fall and not to stand still, if we're going to do that, we need to be unafraid to engage in the tough talking as well as bringing words of encouragement and affirmation.

Let's rise and not fall. But when we do, let's not be afraid to grab hold of those pieces, to put one another back together again, but most definitely never to stand still.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, thank you that as a loving father receives his child, so you are always there ready to receive us.

Help us to be a place, a gathering, a fellowship, a community of people that are unafraid to talk what needs to be talked about.

Help us to be ready and willing to affirm and to encourage and to comfort one another and help us to be ready and willing to receive words of encouragement and comfort.

[ 14 : 19 ] Help us also to be ready and willing to speak words of urging one another and help us to be ready and willing to receive them. that we may be a community of building one another up, to rise and not fall and certainly never to stand still.

Help us to grow each and every day as your children. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.