

***Discipleship 101: Ready To Learn***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***Proverbs 25:11-15, Matthew 13:10-17, Acts 16:9-15***

Our final Scripture reading today is from Acts 16:9-15. Listen now to God's Word. "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us."

Nobody likes a know-it-all. In the last few years, many of us have been caught up in the Harry Potter phenomenon, and no modern character fits the "know-it-all" better than Hermione Granger. She's one of Harry's best friends, but she makes it clear at every opportunity just how brilliant she is. She's the one who always has her hand up in the air to answer the teachers' questions. She rolls her eyes when somebody has a hard time with something she considers easy. There are times in the series where you just want to throttle her because of her arrogance.

And yet as she grows up during the series, we see that she has a remarkable willingness to learn. Her intelligence saves her friends on more than one occasion, but only because she's poured over the books and learned carefully everything she could from her professors. In fact, Hermione has been praised as a role model for young women, proof that you don't have to hide your intelligence, that it's OK to study and work hard to learn.

I use her story as an intro today because we are moving into the second step on our road of discipleship with Jesus today, and that second step is openness. It's a willingness to learn at the feet of our master. When I've studied discipleship in the past, this step has often been skipped. There are so many things we can *do*, so many actions we can take, in our walk with God that it's easy to forget this *attitude*. But without the proper attitude towards Jesus, we may miss the forest for the trees.

That's because in our selfish human nature, we are not normally open to the things of God. We're barely open to learning at all. I remember back to my own high school days. What's the primarily complaint we have about teenagers? You can't tell them anything. They know it all. But truth be told, we've all been there. We've all felt like we knew better than our parents and our teachers and our elders. There seems to be a switch that gets flipped around puberty where suddenly we think we know everything. It takes a long time for that switch to get flipped back off; sometimes it never does.

Surveys about faith formation tell us that it's very unusual for a person to become a Christian later in life if they were never exposed to it at a young age. Most people's faith beliefs are set by their early 20s, if not earlier. It takes a radical experience of God to change those views. Truthfully, most people aren't looking for churches that challenge but churches that soothe. We would like our own personal viewpoints reinforced, whatever they may be. Churches have very much gotten in the business of people-pleasing. We've gotten better at being entertaining. Some changes, such as incorporating modern music, can be a good thing. But sadly, much of what the American church has done has acquiesce to the pursuits and desires and interests of the average person rather than to consistently, gently but boldly, proclaim the message of Jesus Christ. It takes something radical to get us outside of ourselves to be open to what God is doing.

So let's take a look at today's passages and see what they teach us. The first thing I learned in my study this week is that it is God who grants openness to His message. In our passage from Matthew today, Jesus' disciples question why He bothers telling all these stories to the people. Why doesn't He teach straightforwardly? We know that they are asking partially for selfish reasons; often they are as clueless as to the meanings of Jesus' parables as the rest of the crowd is. But there's one key difference that Jesus points out – the disciples have been given the knowledge of the secrets. They have Him to explain the parables to them. The rest receive the mysteries but without the answer key.

Jesus says to them, "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear." Jesus is not saying the blessing is from themselves, from something they've done. Jesus is saying that the blessing is their ability to perceive what few can. He even says that many of the righteous and the prophets of old longed to see these things for themselves, but they didn't. The time wasn't right; they could only content themselves with the promise that one day, God would reveal Himself through the Messiah. God has blessed them with knowledge of His Kingdom not because of their good deeds or personal righteousness but by His own good pleasure that He might be glorified in their growing knowledge of Him.

In the same way, in our final passage today, Luke writes about Paul's vision that leads them to travel to the region Macedonia. When they arrive in Philippi, they meet Lydia, a merchant who worships God. Paul tells her and the group of women with her the good news that Jesus Christ, the Messiah, has come for the forgiveness of sins. Here's what the Bible records next: "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Notice that her openness to Paul doesn't come from herself. While it's very important that she makes a decision to believe Paul and to follow Jesus, the primary emphasis is not on her choice. It's on God's work, God's decision, God's opening her heart to what Paul had to say.

Now it would be easy to say, "What does it matter what I do? If I can't make myself open to God on my own, what's the point?" But that's not what these passages of Scripture are ultimately about. They are pointing us to a key truth about openness to God's message: God is not a part of our story. We are a part of His story. It seems like such a small difference, and yet it makes all the difference in the world.

Here's why: we like to think that God will fit into our lives, that we can shoehorn Him into our suitcase or give Him the spare bedroom that nobody's using. That way, we can pay attention to Him when we like, but ultimately we have control; we own the house; we own our lives. We figure that God should be happy with that. But we really aren't open to what God wants for us and from us. And pretty soon, there's not going to be enough room.

Maybe you're familiar with Clifford the Big Red Dog. We read Clifford stories to the boys, and you probably read them to your kids. Clifford starts off as a tiny little puppy, the runt of the litter, the perfect size pet for city dwellers. But Clifford's no ordinary dog...in a matter of months, Clifford's not just full-grown – he's the size of an airplane! Eventually, the family moves to an island where there's enough room to build a doghouse big enough for him.

I don't want to compare God to Clifford the Big Red Dog...but there's a striking similarity. God can't be roped off into a tiny little portion of your life; He's going to want more and more of you. If you try forcing Him into a corner of your life long enough, eventually He'll be gone altogether and you might not even notice. God isn't going to be satisfied until your whole self belongs to Him, until He can take up residence everywhere and anywhere in your life. But once you genuinely give over the deed of your life to Him, then the house can be put in order. He can't fit into your tiny shack of a kingdom you've tried to build for yourself, but once you totally are His, He will build your life into His Kingdom and make it something far grander than anything you expected.

So if God holds the cards...if God is the one who makes open and receptive to His message...what's our role? If we can't make ourselves ready to learn at Jesus' feet, what can we do? Ultimately, our role is to ask. Our part is to request this willingness, this readiness, from our Heavenly Father in prayer.

We talked last week about baptism and how it is a seal and a sign of all the promises God makes to us. As children of God's promises, God will respond to our requests for good gifts. In Matthew 7:7-11, Jesus tells us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

We've determined that God gives openness to the faithful so they can understand His ways, and that we can ask for that openness in prayer, knowing that God wants to grant the requests of His children. So what does openness to God look like in our walk with Him, exactly?

First, an openness to God's grace is marked by not just a willingness to learn what God would teach us but a readiness to accept it on faith. The Pharisees, surprisingly enough, seemed to want to learn from Jesus. So did the crowds. The religious leaders, the peasants – Jesus had a following everywhere. They sat around for hours and listened to Him. But they just didn't get it. It's not necessarily that the parables were too hard to understand; it's that what Jesus' words meant were too hard for them to stomach.

Every time that Jesus gained a large following, He'd do something that whittled down the crowd. In John 6, after feeding the 5,000, there were a ton of people following Jesus because He had fed them. But instead of delighting in all the attention, Jesus calls them on it. He tells them that they come to Him not because of what the miracle meant, not because it was a proof that He was the Messiah, but because they liked the free buffet. He warns them that no more free handouts are coming. Not only does He tell them that, but it's in this same passage where He tells the crowd that they must eat His body and drink His blood in order to have salvation. They didn't even try to understand what He meant because they were repulsed by the metaphor. The twelve disciples, on the other hand, stick around. They don't get it all, but Peter tells Jesus, "Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life." They took it on faith that Jesus knew what He was talking about.

Taking Jesus and His words, the message of the Bible, at face value can be very difficult. When I was a teenager, I spent a lot of time in the church library on Sundays. There was a big time gap between various music rehearsals and youth group, and so I grew up reading the Bible in there in-between bits of homework. What I found was that I argued with it quite a bit, especially the apostle Paul. Having grown up in the church, I didn't like passages like Colossians 1:21 that said that we were once estranged from God and were hostile toward God because of our evil behavior. I didn't believe I was estranged from God; I grew up knowing God and trying to avoid evil; that made me a generally good person, right? I even argued with Jesus when He commanded His followers to die to themselves. Surely God couldn't mean that I had to give up everything for Him! What did Paul and Jesus know about me in 20<sup>th</sup> century America?

It took me a while to grow and to receive the openness God intended for me to have towards His Word. Over time, I realized that despite my best actions, I wasn't inherently a good person; I was in need of God's constant grace and forgiveness in my life. And I realized that Jesus was absolutely right; if we don't give everything in our lives over to Him, we cannot be right with God. But until I was open to the truth of God's Word, I made excuses to get out of obedience to Him.

When God has begun to grow openness in you to Himself, you will start to have a different outlook. Instead of ignoring the Bible, you find yourself drawn to it. Instead of arguing with Scripture or explaining your way out of it, you start wondering what it might mean if you accepted it and took it for what it says. When things don't make sense in life or in the Bible, when you come across a passage or a situation that seems unbelievable or out of step with our culture, rather than just letting it fester in your heart, you start seeking wisdom, either from a trusted friend who knows Scripture well or from myself or another pastor. And as that happens, the Word of God begins to open up to you and become clear. When we are truly open to what Scripture says, it goes from being an odd ancient book to a wonderful gift. When we are open to what God has done and is doing in the world, our faith grows.

The flipside we see when we become open to the message of Christ is that we have a gentle but increasing closure of our mind to things that are not of God. At times, the church misunderstood this. Some Christians have believed that we are to ignore science and philosophy and the arts and anything that's not explicitly Christian in this world. And that's not what Scripture teaches. Scripture teaches us to engage the world without becoming engrossed in it.

What I mean is this: our culture's leading value is not ethics or morality but tolerance. Our culture demands that everyone tolerate what everyone else is doing as long as it doesn't immediately and explicitly harm us or somebody else. This has been called "openness" by some. But worldly openness is very different from openness to God. Worldly openness doesn't call us to love anybody else, merely to bear with them. "Live and let live" is world's motto.

But godly openness does something different. When God has opened His heart to us, when we are gifted with understanding God's immense love for us, we begin to love with the same love He has. That love is far more than mere tolerance. That love is the embrace of the hopeless, the homeless, the marginalized, the stranger, and the sinner. Jesus showed this in the type of people He healed and the type of people He hung out with.

But true love also wants the very best for people, for them to know the love of God through the salvation and forgiveness that Jesus purchased for those who believe and turn to Him. As our hearts open to God, we take seriously what we find in Scripture, that there are behaviors, values, and choices that do not please God, that do not honor Him, and ultimately wind up damaging and even destroying the people who practice them. As we love people, we do not condemn them, but we steer them towards Christ, who can teach them His ways and open their hearts as well.

This isn't just for other people; it's for we who believe. As God reveals more of Himself to us, as we are willing to grow with Him, we find ourselves less interested in worldly things and sinful options. It's not that we won't be tempted; it's not even that we won't sin along the way, to our shame. It's that gradually, over a long period of time, God will begin to close those doors to sin that were once so appealing to us. God will begin to close our minds to thought patterns that are outside of His will. We can go back there; we can choose to sin; we can "make shipwreck" of our faith. But the good news is that as God opens our minds to more and more of Him, He gives us more and more grace. As Paul says in Romans 6:14, "For sin shall not be your master, for you are not under law but under grace."

As we move forward from here in our study of discipleship, I cannot tell you how important it is that we be open to the movement of God. For our openness to God's ways will determine how eager we will be to practice the spiritual disciplines God will use to draw us nearer to Himself. I don't send you out today to do the miraculous or to take away some radical new notion. I just ask you to pray. Pray for openness. Pray that the Holy Spirit might so move in you that your ears will open to the teachings of our Lord and Savior, that your soul might perceive what God is doing in your midst, and that God would grant you the willingness to follow His Son faithfully no matter the cost.