

# Discipleship Tips - Keeping Christ Central

## Day 1 of 7 • This day's reading

- Philippians 3:1-14
- Matthew 22:34-40

## Devotional

### Finding our true worth

At HOPE International, we seek to help others find a dignified path out of extreme poverty and, in the process, be reconciled to God eternally. But as important as this calling is, the Holy Spirit has repeatedly shown us how crucial it is that the greatest commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” come first in our personal lives and organizational identity. Independent of anything we do for God or others, union with Christ must come first.

A few years ago, Gordon MacDonald wrote a helpful article titled “The Dangers of Missionalism.” In it, he defines missionalism as “the belief that the worth of one’s life is determined by the achievement of a grand objective.” The key idea here is “worth.” Now most of us know better than to say that we should base our worth on what we do for God, but that doesn’t always make it easy to avoid this subtle trap.

In Philippians 3, Paul explains in beautiful language that everything in his life was “counted as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [his] Lord.” He experienced something with Christ that was so compelling, so life-changing, everything else paled in comparison. This connection was the driving force in his life of mission and fruitfulness. But sadly, we can easily find ourselves disconnected from Christ, busy doing many things for Him but missing the vitality and power that only He can bring.

So in an effort to assess where we are with this, let’s consider three reflection questions:

- Am I truly satisfied in Christ today, regardless of my busyness or sense of accomplishment?
- Am I more prone to think about God, His character, and the wonder of the Gospel, or are my thoughts consumed with my activities and myself?
- Do I talk more about the person of Christ or what I do for Him?

DeVern Fromke sums this up nicely in his book *Ultimate Intention*: “Christ, who becomes our life, will not allow us to pursue divine purposes in our own power. We are not called to production but to participation in His life and pursuits.”

May we find our life and worth in Him today and then, in joy, do all that He has prepared in advance for us to do.

## Day 2 of 7 • This day's reading

- John 15

### Devotional

Jesus loves me, He loves me not ...

In the past week, how many times have you thought, "God really loves me"?

I've asked this question to dozens of followers of Jesus, and I often hear the same thing: "I just don't think much about God's love for me on a daily basis, and if I'm honest, I struggle to believe it."

This struggle isn't usually due to lack of information. We know God's love led to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. But that doesn't always translate into confidence that He really wants us near Him today. It's like we're playing the old game of "he loves me, he loves me not," laughing at our foolishness even as we hope for some feeling of certainty.

In His last major teaching before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus chooses a vivid metaphor that reveals His heart for those who follow and obey Him. He states in John 15, "I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser," comparing His disciples to branches that must abide in the vine to live and bear fruit.

This word “abide” in Greek means to “keep continually” or “remain as one.” It occurs 11 times in this chapter—not “strive,” not “do,” not “achieve.” Abide. First and foremost, Jesus invites us into relationship with Him, to “abide in His love” (verse 9).

If you, like me, have struggled with this, here are some practical things God has been teaching me.

**First, deeply receive the love of Jesus that He declared to be the reality of your life in Him.** The truth is that all His followers are intimately connected to the Vine, and all life flows from Him. He loves you. He even likes you. He wants you near Him.

**Second, receive this love every day.** His grace and sacrifice purchased your salvation, but they are also His heart toward you today. We were not made to live this life apart from a daily reception of the nourishing sap of His love and forgiveness.

**Lastly, out of this place of His declared love, obey what He commands.** His love isn’t license for disobedience, but our sin doesn’t negate His forgiveness and affection.

May we all learn to receive God’s limitless affection, His delight in us: broken, foolish humans that we are. Abide in His love.

Receive it every day. And then with the joy of Christ in you, live every moment for Him.

## Day 3 of 7 • This day's reading

- Matthew 6:5-15
- Ephesians 3:14-21

### Devotional

#### A heart of prayer

In today's devotional, Christie Wilson, HOPE International's spiritual integration advisor, addresses a key element of keeping Christ central: prayer.

"We can't do this alone." As I sat around the table discussing discipleship strategies with field leaders whom I deeply respect, I could not escape this thought. Despite all the practical experience and cultural understanding in the room, despite all the studying of best practices, it was evident that we are not capable of bringing about transformation out of our own strength or knowledge. We are completely dependent on the Lord's love, wisdom, and transforming power.

We are on a journey as believers. A journey closer into the heart of God as we encounter Him more deeply. A journey to become increasingly prayerful, often learning from the families we serve what it means to truly live dependent on the Lord day by day.

As we go to our Father, we always want to reflect the following heart of prayer:

**Desiring to see His Kingdom come.** We pray within the larger request that God's Kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:9-10).

**Dependent.** We pray out of a desire to depend more deeply on the Lord, recognizing that without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). He alone has the power to move in ways far beyond what we could ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20-21).

**In faith.** We acknowledge that we do not know how or when the Lord will bring His Kingdom, but we pray with faith and expectation that God responds to our prayers. We never mean to presume or demand that God would do things our way but rejoice and trust His will when He works in ways we did not expect (Matt. 17:14-21, John 14:12-14, Prov. 3:5-6).

**Aligned with Scripture.** We seek to pray for requests that are aligned with what God has already revealed about His will in Scripture.

This prayer effort is one way we step forward in faith, believing that we are totally dependent upon the Lord to bring about transformation in our lives, in the lives of the families we serve, and in the communities in which we live. May you experience the joy of dependence in your life and work as well.

Day 4 of 7 • This day's reading

- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Devotional

Conversion without discipleship

- Country: Rwanda
- Population: 8,000,000
- Days of widespread bloodshed: 100
- Deaths: 1,117,000
- Percentage of the country self-identifying as Christians: 93.6%

In reflecting on these statistics from the Rwandan genocide, I've often wondered: How do people who know the Gospel and regularly attend church take up machetes against their brothers and sisters in Christ?

I sought an answer from HOPE International's Africa savings and credit association region director, Erisa Mutabazi. In addition to his duties with HOPE, Erisa has served as an ordained pastor in Rwanda for almost three decades. He shared: "It is extremely perplexing that genocide was possible. How could true followers of Jesus do this to one another? **I have concluded that the idea of being a Christian at that time did not mean living as a disciple who was called to a completely new life in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).**"



This problem of conversions without discipleship is by no means unique to Rwanda, and the local church has witnessed incredible stories of reconciliation since then, including through programs like HOPE's savings and credit associations. But the fact that people often "convert" to Christianity without surrendering their lives to Christ compels us to pursue nothing short of full discipleship.

So what did Jesus say about what disciples should be and do?

**First, a disciple in the first century was a fully committed "follower."** These followers learned their master's teaching, method of ministry, and way of life. They imitated his thoughts, actions, and habits.

**Second, in the Great Commission, Jesus called His disciples to teach others to obey everything He commanded.** Conversion without commitment to total obedience is foreign to a true disciple of Christ.

**And third, disciples go to others to help them find and follow Christ.** Making disciples is not a spiritual gift or a call for the spiritually "elite." It is not just for "professional" Christians or the highly educated. All disciples are called to multiply.

As the global community vows "never again," I believe one way we can fulfill that promise is by embracing this call to become new

creations. May we boldly choose Christ as our first identity—over nation, race, political party, or religious denomination. May we seek to make disciples in whatever calling He has given us. And may we choose each day to follow God's call to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him (Matt. 16:24).

## Day 5 of 7 • This day's reading

- Luke 10:1-24

### Devotional

Why you don't need to sell Jesus

In East Asia, one HOPE International client led 38 people in her rural village to Christ in two years.

In the Philippines, another woman built relationships with over 100 people who now come with her to church.

A woman in California with only a second-grade education has started discipleship groups that now reach hundreds in her community.

If we're honest, stories like these produce a mix of emotions. Even as we're inspired, there's often a subtle whisper: *"I could never do that."*

Do you ever feel that way? That stories of amazing transformation must come from uniquely gifted people who have figured out just the right methods to share Christ?

At HOPE, spiritual impact comes as God uses staff and clients to reach others. And just like you and me, these men and women realize they are imperfect messengers. The enemy works hard to

tempt them to think, “I can’t really help others follow Jesus. I can’t be bold. Someone else, someone better, should do that.”

But freedom, boldness, and multiplication are exactly what God desires.

In Luke 10, Jesus appoints 72 followers and sends them ahead of Him. As He prepares them, He provides two powerful principles we can use to defeat our fears and embolden us to be fruitful for His expanding Kingdom.

**God isn’t asking you to change people.** In verse 2, He says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” The Father, the Lord of the harvest, promises that the harvest is plentiful. What freedom to recognize that it does not depend on us!

**God is already preparing people for you to reach.** Verses 5-11 describe how Jesus commanded the disciples to decide where to spend their time. In essence, He said, “Look for a person of peace, and share the Good News with those who receive you.” God is not asking us to argue, badger, or cajole people into the Kingdom. He is already preparing hearts to receive us.

May we never be weighed down by the lie that we are responsible to change the hearts of others. May we release the burden of having to “sell” Jesus in just the right way to see lives change. As children of God, we are free to trust the Lord of the harvest and

boldly seek those He has prepared, confident that this is how God builds His Kingdom—through ordinary, available people.

## Day 6 of 7 • This day's reading

- John 6

### Devotional

Why Jesus let people walk away

In this passage, Jesus is being chased around the Sea of Galilee by a large crowd. He's healed terrible diseases, fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes, and taught with great authority.

Things were going so well the crowd was planning to make Him king by force. In modern language, Jesus was a rock star.

What would you have been thinking if you were one of the disciples? "Surely this is the moment. You've got them eating out of your hands ... literally! Use your power to make them follow you."

But in one of the countless ways Jesus defies expectations, He doesn't capitalize on His fame. Desiring true disciples over admiring crowds, He proclaims harder—even potentially offensive—teachings. The result?

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66).

What happens next is staggering. Jesus didn't beg or run after them to clarify: "Wait, I got a little carried away. Let me rephrase."

He let them walk away. And then, as if to drive the point home, He turned and said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”

I’m not saying we should select the most difficult passages in the Bible to scare people away. But if our goal is the same as that of Jesus—true discipleship and life-change—we have to be willing to let people walk away. Jesus always honored the dignity and choices of those He met. Remember the rich young ruler. The unrepentant criminal on the cross. You and me.

Similarly, HOPE International’s network gives clients the opportunity to opt in: to be a client of a Christian organization, to participate in times of Bible study, and to engage in deep discipleship opportunities outside of regular meetings. We believe that these choices are some of the best indicators we have of hearts moving toward Christ.

So as you share Jesus with others, remember that if Jesus honored others’ choices to walk away, there will be times when we need to do the same. Giving others the space to say no is hard and requires great discernment. It certainly doesn’t mean we stop praying, showing God’s love, or looking for opportunities to connect.

Through it all, we can be confident that, no matter what, no one can walk too far to be beyond God’s reach.

## Day 7 of 7 • This day's reading

- 1 Corinthians 3

### Devotional

#### Discipleship takes time

On a sparkling day in late August, I sat in a dusty African courtyard with HOPE International's new field coordinator, Pastor John. We met to discuss a savings program that HOPE recently launched in an area of this country that has historically been highly resistant to Christianity.

As Pastor John and I talked, a man in traditional Muslim garb approached our table. Pastor John greeted him warmly and said, "Please meet, Yayah, one of our volunteers. He used to be a sheikh."

With a broad smile, Yayah shared his journey toward Christ. A Christian acquaintance asked Yayah to teach him the Quran to engage more effectively with his Muslim friends. Yayah decided that if this man was studying his holy book, it would only be fair to study the Bible. After nine years, Yayah concluded that the Bible is true and chose to make Jesus Lord of his life.



Though Yayah rejoiced in his newfound faith, following Jesus was not without its hardships. At that time, Yayah had two wives, and both immediately left him. He lost his home and had to move in with his Christian friend for the next three years. Despite these challenges, his desire to reach his people led him to complete pastoral training. He explained, “My Muslim friends and family are dying without Christ. No matter what, I must share Him with them.”

As I walked away from that remarkable conversation, I took away three things:

1. Sometimes it takes years of relationship, study, and discussion for someone to find Christ. In a world accustomed to quick fixes, we must be patient and not give up.
2. Difficult environments do not mean that we cannot build loving friendships. Yayah came to faith in Christ through a friend who refused to presume that different perspectives on faith automatically produce separation and hostility.
3. Community insiders like Pastor John and Yayah are generally more effective disciplers than outsiders who don't know the culture. Yayah shared, “Because I am from the same tribe, I have more opportunities to pray to Jesus and speak of Him where people will accept it.”

May this story encourage you to continue pressing on in the daily work of making disciples, knowing that the fruit might come years down the road.

\*For security, names of people and places have been changed or withheld.