

## **WHAT IS A DISCIPLE? Part 3: The Pursuit of Righteousness**

**Scripture: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8**

**Preached on the weekend of September 23 and 24, 2006**

For several weeks, we, as a congregation, are spending some time during worship centering ourselves in a question that is inseparably linked to our identity and purpose as a church. That question is this: What is a disciple?

It is an important question, don't you think? After all, the stated purpose of the United Methodist Church and certainly the stated mission of Central Highlands Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is our purpose, born of our identity in Jesus Christ. Our purpose is to make disciples who are willing to follow Jesus. But before we will ever be able to do that effectively, we must first have a vision for what a disciple of Jesus Christ is. We cannot be intentional about making disciples, in other words, unless we have some degree of conviction concerning what a disciple is. Therefore, this evening, we find ourselves confronted with this important question once again: What is a disciple?

Thus far in this series, Scripture has provided two responses to this question. Scripture has told us, for example, that a disciple is a person of faith—but not just any faith. Much more specifically, a disciple is a person whose faith is not simply a set of beliefs but a growing and vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ, and whose life is filled with the good works that a healthy relationship with Jesus Christ always inspires. Faith without works, says Scripture is dead. But the flip side of that is also true: Works without faith are random and unsubstantiated. Therefore, a disciple is a person whose faith relationship with Jesus Christ is lived out in good works. That's one biblical response to the question.

Last week, in part two of this series, Scripture revealed to us that a disciple is also a person who loves Jesus enough to subordinate to him the most powerful organ in the human body: the tongue. Meaning that disciples of Jesus are people who are careful with their words—people who are so determined to allow the Holy Spirit to tame and to govern their tongue that all of their speech is far more likely to illuminate the Kingdom of God than to dishonor it.

This week, Scripture offers a third response to the question at hand. What is a disciple? Well, this evening's scripture answers, a disciple is a person who pursues righteousness in order that his life or her life might reflect the light of Christ more brightly and more radiantly. Which is to say, disciples are people who believe that the story of Jesus Christ is a story with pictures; and those pictures are the righteous patterns of behavior tangibly demonstrated in the daily lives of people who follow Jesus.

Disciples are people who pursue the righteousness of Jesus Christ in their daily living.

If I were to ask you what the word "righteous" means, I wonder what definition you would give to me. It's interesting that, in English, the word is a derivative of an old English word that means, literally, a right condition, or a noble state, or an exemplary or

commendable way of living. Meaning that, in English, the word “righteous” does not simply make reference to a momentary decision to do the right thing. Rather, it makes reference to a condition in which pursuing rightness is the norm; a condition in which doing the right thing is not a momentary decision but a way of life.

That, I think, is what tonight’s scripture has in mind when it makes reference to a “harvest of righteousness,” which is such a wonderful biblical phrase. James 3:18—“A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” What is a harvest of righteousness? Is it one right decision? No. Is it an occasional flourishing of morality? No. What is a good harvest? It is something bountiful and productive. Therefore a harvest of righteousness is a bounty of rightness, a condition in which doing the right thing is not a momentary decision but a way of life.

For someone who thinks biblically, the condition of doing the right thing cannot be separated from the mind and the heart of Jesus Christ. Because Scripture is clear about this point: The chief goal of the Christian life is to be inwardly occupied by the mind of Christ. “Let the same mind be in you,” are the words found in the New Testament book of Philippians, “that was in Christ Jesus.” Meaning that Christian righteousness is a lifelong journey into the mind of Christ, a journey in which we become increasingly more interested in Jesus’ thoughts and desires than our own until his thoughts and desires BECOME our own.

That, according to Scripture, is the harvest of righteousness. It is a life lived in and for Jesus Christ, a life in which the Holy Spirit brings us daily and more deeply into the likeness of Christ so that his mind becomes our mind, his thoughts and desires become our thoughts and desires, his words and deeds become our words and deeds.

Back to our foundational question: What is a disciple? Disciples are people who are intentional about pursuing the righteousness of Jesus Christ in their daily living, so that their lives become what tonight’s scripture refers to as a harvest of righteousness.

Tonight’s scripture also makes clear that there are some very specific things that will prevent a good harvest: “For if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart,” tonight’s scripture proclaims, “do not be boastful, for such wisdom does not come from God but is both unspiritual and of the devil. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will not be righteousness, but wickedness of every kind.”

What prevents a harvest of righteousness according to that Scripture? Two very specific things: envy, which involves desiring the things that are not ours to have; and selfish ambition, which involves giving our own interests priority over everyone else’s including God’s.

It comes as no great surprise that Scripture would highlight these two impulses, because they are impulses that have been the foundation of sin from the very beginning. In the garden, how is it that the serpent tempts Eve? “Eat of this forbidden fruit,” the serpent says to her, “and you will become like God, knowing good and evil.” The serpent, in

other words, appeals to Eve's envy and her selfish ambition. He appeals to her envious desire to possess a divine authority that is not hers to have, and he appeals to her selfish ambition to become her own God.

Envy and selfish ambition, you see, have been with us for a long time, and they remain at the heart of all human sin. In fact, I don't think I'm overstating it when I say that every sin we commit can somehow be traced back to envy and selfish ambition. Every hurtful thing that we do to another person, for example, emerges from an envious desire to possess an authority over that person that is not ours to have. Every refusal to live out the righteousness to which Christ calls us emerges from our selfish ambition to become our own God.

Therefore, says Scripture, "where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will not be righteousness, but wickedness of every kind."

Which brings us to a very practical and very important question: How is it that we prepare ourselves for a harvest of righteousness in our living? Boy, I sure do wish that I could tell you about a convenient shortcut to righteousness. But none exists. Instead, as tonight's scripture makes clear, a harvest of righteousness requires on our part a willingness to submit to the wisdom of God, the wisdom from above, which is a wisdom that requires many things from us.

First, the wisdom of God and the pursuit of righteousness require purity from us. Purity. And the word for purity that is used in tonight's scripture implies an immaculate condition of spotlessness. Purity, in other words, involves allowing the Holy Spirit to pull us away from any habit or any practice that stains our life.

Years ago, a seventeen-year-old girl made an appointment to see me in my church office. During that appointment, she informed me that she was tired of living a lie. Her parents thought she was a virgin. She wasn't. Her parents thought that she had never used drugs. She had. Her parents thought that she always told the truth about where she was going and what she was doing. The truth, however, was that, for several years, she had lied to her parents with alarming ease and regularity.

As I describe her, she may sound to you like a manipulative teenager. But that day in my office, she was tearful and penitent, eager to be right with God, desperate to be honest with her parents, but afraid of what all of all of that might mean. We spoke for over an hour about the life of following Jesus, the urgency of repentance, and the cleansing power of God's grace. Then we knelt at the altar of that church's sanctuary and we prayed together. Specifically, we prayed that God's forgiveness would make its way into the soul of this seventeen-year-old girl, in such a way that she might come to understand her own preciousness and her own potential.

Ten days later she was back in my office—only, in this second appointment, her countenance and her body language were entirely different. There was a spirit of deliverance about her that was palpable, as though she had been liberated from a terrible burden. She told me that she had confessed everything to her parents. Everything.

Much to her surprise, they had forgiven her and embraced her. Beyond that, she told me that she had begun to make some significant changes in her living, the kind of changes that would lead her into the kind of life that she knew God wanted her to live.

In the midst of her sharing that day, I asked what in hindsight strikes me as a fairly stupid question. “How do you feel in the aftermath of all of those changes? How do you feel?”

The question might have been stupid, but she didn’t back away from it. “How do I feel,” she said. “I’ll tell you exactly how I feel, because I’ve been thinking about it all day long. For the first time in a long time,” she said to me that day, “I feel clean.”

What a powerful thing to hear from a seventeen-year-old-girl who, a couple of weeks earlier, had felt permanently stained and blemished by the life that she had lived. “How do I feel? I feel clean.”

In light of the biblical revelation that a harvest of righteousness demands purity, here is my question: Are you able to say what that seventeen-year-old girl said? Are you able to say that you feel clean? Are you centered in the cleansing grace of Jesus Christ, and are you willing to allow the Holy Spirit to pull you away from any habit or practice that stains your life? That is the kind of purity that Scripture describes; and that kind of purity is part of the harvest of righteousness.

But so are peace, and gentleness, and a willingness to yield according to tonight’s Scripture. Peace, gentleness, and a willingness to yield. The three words used in tonight’s scripture to describe those three attributes are words that imply the kind of life that, by its very nature, makes the world into a more relational place. They are words that imply the kind of life that generates a spirit reconciliation wherever there is bitter division; the kind of life that generates a spirit of kindness wherever there is hatred; the kind of life lived by someone who would rather be inconvenienced himself or herself if it meant avoiding making someone else’s life difficult. Peace, gentleness, and a willingness to yield.

In 1999, Fred Rogers, better known as Mr. Rogers, was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame. During his acceptance speech, in a huge auditorium filled with Hollywood bigwigs, Fred Rogers received a standing ovation. Then he spoke. “Let’s just take 10 seconds,” he said, “to think of those people who loved us, and wanted the best for us in life, and encouraged us to become who we are.” Then, out of respect for Mr. Rogers, those Hollywood bigwigs became quiet. Some of them even cried as they remembered the people who had encouraged them.

When I see a replay of Mr. Rogers acceptance speech from that night, I am always both touched and inspired—touched and inspired because I have always looked upon Mr. Rogers as a man of peace and gentleness, a man who is willing to yield in order to make time for children of all ages. If he were alive to hear me say that about him, he would probably be quick to give the credit to his deep Christian faith, a faith, after all, in which he had been ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. That night back in 1999, when he was

inducted into the Television Hall of Fame, Mr. Rogers brought about a spirit of peace and gentleness that was far more powerful than the glitz of Hollywood. By his very nature, Mr. Rogers made that auditorium into a more peaceful and gentle place, thereby reminding us of the beauty of the pursuit of righteousness.

I wonder, are we allowing the Holy Spirit to bring us, each and every day, more deeply into a commitment to peace, a commitment to gentleness, a commitment to yielding for the sake of others. Are we allowing the Holy Spirit, in other words, to bring us into the kind of life that makes auditoriums and acceptance speeches into something sacred—the kind of life that makes people think about Jesus wherever we go?

What does the pursuit of righteousness demand from us. It demands purity. It demands a commitment to peace, gentleness, and a yielding spirit. Scripture also makes clear that righteousness demands mercy, or perhaps a more specific translation, the kind of compassion for hurting people that renders us unable to turn a blind eye to pain and suffering. Mercy.

And then finally, Scripture tells us that the pursuit of righteousness demands from us the absence of hypocrisy. The word translated as “hypocrisy” in Scripture means, literally, a stubborn refusal to be false—a stubborn refusal to fake anything about ourselves.

If you worship here regularly, than you have heard me speak the following words more than once as part of my benediction: “Allow there to be no inconsistency whatsoever between the way in which we have worshiped and the way we live our lives.” Those are words that have become very important in my own life of prayer. Each day, in fact, I find myself praying this prayer: “Lord Jesus, allow there to be no inconsistency whatsoever between who I am in worship and who I am at home, who I am at the grocery store, who I am at the post office.” I can’t tell you that I am always successful in living out that prayer. Hypocrisy is still part of my life. Too often I act one way in worship and another in my daily living. But I’m still growing. I’m still in the process of becoming the full-time Christ follower that Christ is calling me to be. And I’m still praying that prayer with a sense of urgency: “Lord Jesus, allow there to be no inconsistency or hypocrisy in my life.”

Will you join me in praying that kind of prayer? More importantly, will you join me in living that prayer? I ask the question because the absence of hypocrisy is an important part of the pursuit of righteousness. We are to be the same people out there that we are in here so that righteousness does not become simply a weekend hobby.

What is a disciple? Disciples are people who are intentional about pursuing the righteousness of Jesus Christ in their daily living, so that their lives become what tonight’s scripture refers to as a harvest of righteousness. And what does the pursuit of righteousness demand from us? It demands purity. It demands a commitment to peace, and gentleness, and a yielding spirit. It demands mercy. And it demands the absence of hypocrisy. If that sounds like a lot to you...well...it is. But that’s the life of discipleship to Jesus Christ. And it is the most meaningful and joyful life that there is to live.

