

We have never had a shortage of babies and children at Grace Church. Maybe it’s because I’m a guy but I lose track of which moms are pregnant, when they are due and all that jazz. Then last week I got a close-up view of little Walter Aspenson and I thought, “Who is this little boy that Jared and April are holding? He’s no longer the tiny little infant from not that long ago. For parents, grandparents and really for all of us, it’s exciting to watch these little ones grow up. I think back and remember that Ethan was about Walter’s age when we first moved to Viroqua and now he’s over here in the corner playing with his drumsticks. Parents get excited when their child passes all of the firsts in life. The first time he or she rolls over. The first time they can sit up by themselves. Their first birthday and of course, their first steps. Beautiful precious progress.

The analogy to our spiritual growth is not just close—it’s exactly the same kind of progress. Both Peter and the writer of Hebrews mention new believers as newborn babes drinking spiritual milk. Here in Ephesians chapter four Paul says that all believers begin as children. That’s OK. That’s just as normal as a newborn infant drinking his mother’s milk and learning to take his first steps. We have to go through a normal process of spiritual growth. We all start as children but we don’t want to stay there any more than you’d want your own child to never progress in his or her life. If you don’t show progress, then there is always an underlying issue of health present. And that is true physically as it is spiritually.

Paul wants us to move from children to maturity and he has a process for helping make this happen.

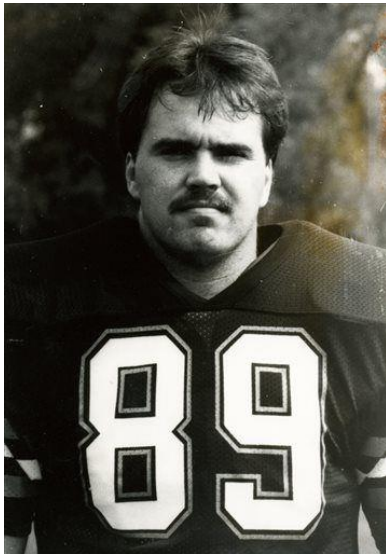


Two weeks ago we saw how ministry is necessary for maturity. If you recall we emphasized the idea that ministry leads to maturity and not the other way around. This is quite clear from the passage. Ministry first, and then maturity.

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

Now you might say, “Sure. I’ll do ministry but you need to equip me first. That’s how it works, right? Equipped for ministry.” Equipping does come first but remember that the best kind of equipping is ministry. You learn as you do. It’s on the job training, the best kind. There is no spiritual growth, there is no maturity without ministry.

We should probably go back and make sure that we understand maturity. Maturity is not just avoiding sin or being a nice person. Anyone, believer or otherwise could do that. The end result is not just growing in maturity in other areas either. The end result of being a disciple of Jesus is that you would in turn become a disciple maker. A disciple maker is one who helps others become better disciples. It’s that simple.

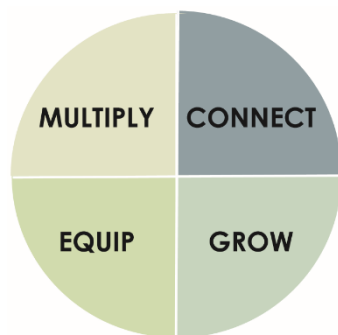


Does anyone recognize this guy? This is none other than Mike McCarthy when he played tight end for a tiny school called Baker University. McCarthy did not have NFL level talent so his end goal was not become a better football player but a better maker of other football players. He wanted to make other football players better at what they do and turn them into a team. In the same way, the progression of a disciple is not to be the most holy and righteous person possible but rather to help other disciples do the same. Just as there is no maturity without ministry, unless you become a disciple maker you will never be a mature disciple yourself.

This is what our “discipleship goal” is aiming at. The discipleship goal is to make more disciples—that evangelism—and better disciples—that’s growth—by nurturing all believers toward the stage of multiplication—

that’s discipling.

Now that’s controversial to some people. The standard is too high. That’s unrealistic. After all, it’s hard enough just to be a basic believer disciple maker. I know it can feel that way but remember, it’s a lifelong process. You don’t have to get there overnight. But we as we said two weeks ago, we do have to aim at the right target. Remember the three-time Olympic medalist who missed his second gold medal because he aimed at the wrong target?



THE DISCIPLESHIP GOAL

Making **more** disciples and making **better** disciples by nurturing **all** believers toward the stage of multiplication

let alone deal with the pressure of being a know it can feel that way but remember, it’s a lifelong process. You don’t have to get there overnight. But we as we said two weeks ago, we do have to aim at the right target. Remember the three-time Olympic medalist who missed his second gold medal because he aimed at the wrong target?

I am in a discipleship huddle with Ray Olson and two other men. This past week I heard Ray say something incredibly sobering. He said that he knows pastors who have gotten to the end of their ministries and finally realized that they were climbing a ladder for decades until they realized it was leaning against the wrong wall. He didn't mean climbing the ladder in terms of financial or career success, but it was another way of saying that they had gotten really good at hitting the wrong target. They were busy and active and doing good work. They had large, impressive churches. Big building, lots of bodies and plenty of bucks. But they had largely missed the target. They aimed at something less than making disciples. They never set forth the Biblical standard that ministry means making disciples. They never told their people that unless they make disciples they can never be mature believers. They did not have ministries and process in place that would lead their people toward making disciples.

I'm not sure if we do either. I think we have articulated this pretty well over the years. I think we have and are making disciples but I'm not sure that we are a discipling church. Do you see the difference? A church that makes disciples is at least aiming at the right target. A church that makes disciples at least has some people engaged in discipling. But a discipling church understand that every believer is supposed to be making disciples. We make disciples but I do not believe we are yet a discipling church. But I want us to become that. Become. It will take some time.

That's a huge goal. It can be depressing to think that you may never reach such an audacious goal. But can I make it more encouraging for you? Here's a simple principle for making disciples. Just be one chapter ahead of the other guy. Here's what I mean. Let's say that the Christian life is like reading a large, multi-chapter book. The chapters mark your progression forward in maturity. All you need to do is stay one chapter ahead of the other guy and then turn around and help him with his chapter. You don't have to be five chapters ahead of the other guy. One chapter is enough because if you've read that chapter, you are just a bit more equipped than he or she is. You've walked the path that they are about to walk and you can help them navigate the next steps. That's all ministry really is. That's the simplicity of discipleship, taking a few steps and helping the person behind you do the same thing.

So that's our target. That's what we mean by maturity. That's what we're after. With that in mind, let's get back to the process laid out in chapter four. We all start as children but we want to move toward maturity. Ministry is one of the engines that moves us forward. Doing stuff. Helping our brothers and sisters take the next steps, read the next chapter if you will. It's the work of ministry. And it is work, by the way. Most ministry is a blessing. It can be fun. It is usually rewarding. But it is also work, often hard work. Work that requires a commitment to finish. Parenting is a good example, isn't it? It's a crazy mixture of blessing and sweat. You bleed for your family but you are also incredibly blessed. It's the work of ministry and it's one of the engines that drives maturity forward.

But the other engine that drives maturity is speaking the truth in love. Let's see what that looks like in context.

14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,



Paul said rather than remaining as children and being tossed around by every wind doctrine and craftiness in deceitful schemes, speak the truth in love. Speaking the truth in love is contrasted with speaking lies with craftiness and deceit.

The interesting thing about speaking the truth in love is the way it appears in the original Greek. Here's what John Stott said about it.

'Speaking the truth in love' is not the best rendering of his expression, for the Greek verb makes no reference to our speech. Literally, it means, 'truing in love', and includes the notions of 'maintaining', 'living' and 'doing' the truth.¹

He is right. The word 'speaking' is not in the original language. So it is definitely more than just speaking the truth in love but it is certainly not less than that.

Normally, we have a very narrow notion of what it means to speak the truth in love. Speaking the truth in love usually means that we have something difficult to say to someone, but we need to say it anyway. We'll say it as nicely as we possibly can but say it we will. It might be a sin we need to confront you about. It might be some way you offended me. It might be a direction in life or a decision you made that we think is taking you in the wrong direction. There are any number of truths that we need to speak into your life so we figure out how to say them as lovingly as possible.

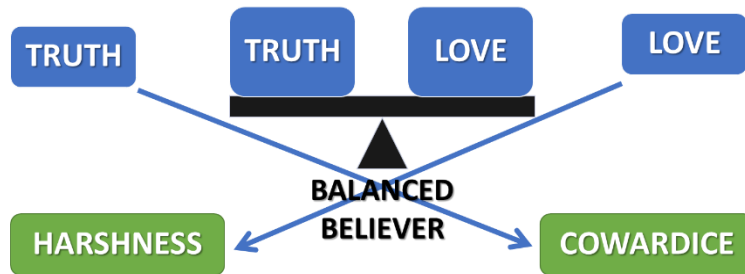
Now that is true. That is speaking the truth in love and we need to do this for one another. Remember that Paul is contrasting speaking lies deceitfully and speaking the truth lovingly. So we do this to counter all of the lies that surround us all of the time. But here's what happens to us. We want to speak the truth in love but that is a delicate balance.



Teeter totters are virtually non-existent on playgrounds these days. This is almost exactly what the teeter totter looked like at the playground at Hartville Elementary School—except that ours had gravel under them. Can you imagine—gravel? You wonder how our generation ever lived through childhood. Our entire playground was either blacktop or

gravel. (Incidentally, while I was playing on this playground, John Eumarian was about two miles away running a private Christian school with his wife. Of course I didn't know him back then.) They looked like this with the long wooden boards that would give you splinters in your bottom. My friend Tom Whitmer and I would hop on the teeter totter almost every day during recess. We'd go up and down for a few minutes but the real challenge was to keep the board perfectly balanced. I'm sure we pretended that the gravel was lava or something and our feet could not touch. It was difficult because Tom was always bigger than me so we had to do some elementary physics experiments and balance out the fulcrum. Anyway, we got pretty good at it, or at least that's how I remember it.

In the same way, this is what we are after when we speak the truth in love. It's a teeter totter with a pointed fulcrum and two weights on either end. The problem is the sucker does not want to stay balanced and that's because we are not balanced as people, as Christians. So we're always leaning to one side or the other. Either we are too truth oriented and our words are not sufficiently seasoned with love. Or the opposite is true. We have loads of compassion but we tend to shy away from saying hard truths.



So the first problem is that we are imbalanced. But the second problem is that we don't know that we are imbalanced. The love imbalanced people are way over to one side but they don't know it and the truth imbalanced people are way on the other side and don't know it. Now

there is a perfect balance to be achieved. We'll never strike that balance. We'll never be able to strike that perfect balance but in theory, it exists. It's what we need to strive for.

And then the problems get worse. When a love imbalanced person sees more of a balanced believer, they're so imbalanced to one side that they think the balanced person is too harsh. Do you see what I mean? In their minds, the balanced person does not have enough love so they look harsh to the love imbalanced person. But in reality, it's their own imbalances that is causing the issue. Then of course the opposite is true. The truth imbalanced person sees a balanced believer and concludes that they are a coward. They're too soft and unwilling to speak the truth. But in reality, it's their own imbalances that is causing the issue. So we want to speak the truth in love but these forces are continually working against us.

If you don't believe me, then I think can convince you with two words. National anthem. Am I right? What an explosion in the media and on social media we have seen lately. Emotions fly left and right. Both sides think they are right. Most people would not admit that they are imbalanced. Believe me—many people who are commenting on this are imbalanced in more ways than one! Admittedly, this issue is a hot potato and not normative but it does show how easily we get out of balance on the truth and love scale.

But speaking the truth in love is much more than merely saying hard things in a loving way. It's so much more than you gently confronting some sin in my life—though that is part of it. To see

what I mean we need only ask a simple question—what is truth? That’s the all important question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, but he asked it in a spirit of skepticism.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body^[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.^[b] ⁴ But^[c] God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-7).

that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe (Ephesians 2:18-19).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22)

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25)

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right (Ephesians 6:1).

⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:31-32).

This is the truth. This is the gospel and if you speak these words and help one another live out these words, you will be making disciples.

Here’s a closing question for you. I’m not asking you this to heap guilt or shame on you. If the Christian life was a twenty chapter book, which chapter are you in? Unless you are in chapter one, you can turn around and help someone who is one chapter behind you. But they also need to have the humility to want to take the next steps themselves.

Rich Maurer
October 1, 2017

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, © 1979, pp. 171-172.