

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.21**

# Applying Truth in the walk of faith

This tutorial introduces the second and third questions in the area of *Discipleship*: ‘Are they being helped to apply the general Truth from God’s Word to their own specific real-life situations?’ and ‘Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?’

## Last time

We started out with five points that clarify some understandings of God’s Word that frame the picture of discipleship presented in these resources. We then thought about the fact that people live within a complex network of connections, relationships and dependencies. When some do hear Jesus’ call to follow Him as Saviour and Master, it is not in a vacuum, but against the background of all of the other voices that are trying to forge links and allegiances. Jesus wants His disciples to put His relationship with them first, but His intention is not to add to the existing burden of relationships but rather to bear it with those who follow Him.

We also thought about how new believers need help from others as they learn to relate to everyone on the basis of their new identity as disciples of Jesus. Anyone taking on the role of discipling others needs to be careful they are encouraging allegiances and commitments to Jesus rather than to themselves or their group.

## The second question under “D” for *Discipleship*

- Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?
- Are they being helped to apply the general truth from God’s Word to their own specific real-life situations?
- Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?

- Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?
- Do they have access to defined pathways that offer Bible-based resources, practical instruction and relational discipleship to adequately equip them to serve the church locally and globally?

## Practical outcomes in the real world

As we've noted a number of times before, God is not interested in religion, theological study, doctrinal orthodoxy or Scriptural knowledge *as ends in themselves*. Under the Old Covenant He spoke dismissively of people whose hearts are far away even while they're honouring Him with their words, and whose "worship" is just man-made rules they've memorised (Isaiah 29:13). The apostle Paul talked about people who are always pursuing new teaching but never really coming to a genuine understanding of the Truth (2 Timothy 3:7). Elsewhere he drew a contrast between *knowledge* that does little else than make us feel important, and *love* that has the practical outcome of strengthening the church (1 Corinthians 8:1). In that same epistle he makes a similar contrast in the famous "love chapter" when he says, "If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:2).

This is not to say that understanding, knowledge, or theory is unimportant, but only that it is fruitless without practical outcomes in the real world. This takes us back to a previous discussion about *form*, *function* and *fulfilment*. From the beginning, God's dealings with people always addressed the very real circumstances of their lives, with the goal of them knowing how He wanted them to live and what He wanted them to achieve.

## The example of David

Among numerous examples in God's Narrative, we get a great picture of this in the way He interacted with David throughout his life, particularly through the prophets Samuel, and later, Nathan. God had an amazing plan for the youngest son of Jesse and we know that he'd go on to have a pivotal role in the history of Israel; he'd also contribute through many of the Psalms to God's written Narrative; he was the prominent human ancestor in the Messiah's royal lineage and for countless generations David has provided a prime example of a human being relating to the Lord. As that story unfolds, we see clearly that this Hebrew person God chose to be part of His purposes and who He even called "a man after my own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22), was a very real human being with weaknesses and needs. But he also loved God's Word deeply as he would express poignantly in worship songs like this, "How I

delight in your commands! How I love them! I honour and love your commands. I meditate on your decrees.” (Psalm 119:47,48)

Although the interaction between God and David was very much on a spiritual level (e.g. Psalm 51:10,11 “Renew a loyal spirit within me...don’t take your Holy Spirit from me.”) it wasn’t only that - it played out in the very real world of bitter enmity and sweet friendship, triumph and defeat, zeal for God and horrendous sin, love and lust, mercy and murder. Often God’s communication with David was through His designated mouthpieces, His prophets. The first was Samuel who was sent to anoint the young man as Saul’s successor. Later, to escape from the enraged king, David went and lived with Samuel in Ramah. We can only surmise that the aged prophet might have been used during this time by God to teach more of His Truth to the future monarch of His people, perhaps in what might even be described as a discipleship relationship.

But it was Nathan, the next of Israel’s prophets, who would have the task of passing on some very direct communication from God to David. It was through Nathan that the Lord told David he should prepare for the building of the Jerusalem temple. After David’s adultery with Bathsheba, and the arranged killing of her husband Uriah, it was Nathan that God sent to rebuke the king. And later the prophet would warn David of his son Adonijah’s plot to take the throne in place of Solomon. Without doubt, David loved the Lord and His Word, but the nature of God and the justice of His Law were not just concepts to be discussed over a glass of wine with Samuel or for meditation in the mountains while strumming a harp. He needed to learn their reality in light of day-to-day struggles and realities of his own human weakness. Once or twice he might have been given a prophetic glimpse of God’s Messianic purposes, but those were being enacted right now in the dust and sweat of work, in the blood of battle, and in decisions that would have a real impact on the future of the nation entrusted to him.

## **The Example of Jesus and His disciples**

When it comes to examples in God’s Word of His people being helped to apply Truth to their own circumstances, we need look no further than Jesus and His disciples. Just one instance among many is found in Matthew 10 in a briefing session before He sends them out to tell their fellow Israelites that the Kingdom of God is at hand. In Matthew’s concise account - just 36 verses of instructions - Jesus touches on abstract concepts like God’s love and care for them, but also very down to earth applications to do with money and clothing. He shares a glimpse of future challenges that must have filled them with excitement, but also terror - they’d stand trial before governors and kings, nations would hate them - but then moments later He gives detailed directions about what they should do in the next few days if people in a nearby town don’t listen to their message.

Of course by this stage, when He has singled them out to name them as His apostles and is sending them out on a short-term mission, they have already been with Him as part of the larger group of followers for some time. They've heard Him teach from the Scriptures in the synagogues and to crowds by the lake. They've seen Him interacting with people of all kinds: earnest seekers, half-hearted followers, antagonistic religious leaders. They've heard Him describe His relationship to the Father. They have at least some perspective of what was involved in being His disciples. So now He's building on the foundations of Truth already there and counting on the model of His own life that they have had opportunity to learn from.

All of that has been their classroom that has mixed theory with some practical realities, but now they are going to be sent out on their own to get their feet wet, or perhaps to briefly "jump in the deep end". They are moving from just being His disciples (learners) to also being His apostles (sent ones). Now they get to put His teaching and instruction into practice; in the context of real life, doing an actual task. They'll need to apply the Truth they've heard in their relationships as co-workers with each other, in the face of rejection or indifference to the Message, to trust God for their food and somewhere to sleep. For now this is just practice; it won't be long and they'll be back with Him, debriefing, telling Him everything that happened to them out there (Luke 9:10). But He knows that in just a few short months He will be authorising them for the real Task that He's equipping them for. Then they will be responsible to pass on to others all He was now teaching them, not only to fellow Jews who share so much background of Truth, but also to make disciples among the "unreached" Gentile people groups.

## Is teaching discipleship?

It is sometimes debated whether teaching - i.e. the exposition of God's Word to a group - is legitimately discipleship. In fact, it's probably unnecessary to draw too sharp a distinction between them. God's Word, as well as experience, tell us that teaching for the gathered church is indispensable. There's also a valid place for the classroom, the conference and the retreat, with some very real benefits to having a group processing instruction together. But certain factors (e.g. the size of the group, how formal or interactive the dynamics are, how well the teacher knows the audience, how well the audience knows each other, how culturally and generationally homogenous the group is, how much shared teaching from God's Word they've had, how close they are in maturity, etc.) come into play.

So, with that in mind, perhaps a helpful statement can be made along these lines: *Teaching moves towards discipleship as it becomes less formal, theoretical, general, and detached, with more personal application, discussion, interaction and access to personal relationships.*

As these AccessTruth resources themselves, by nature of their form, are more theoretical, general and without recourse to direct interaction or personal relationships, we rely on those who make use of them (whether they're being equipped or helping to equip others) to bring in a discipleship element. That serves as an example for any teaching situation that is strong on theory but short on personal application. The *form* in which teaching takes place should be regularly evaluated in this light and, where possible, adjustments made to serve the *function* and eventual *fulfilment* of discipleship. In many situations, such as these materials, additional opportunities have to be made so that somehow, someone who is further down the road of discipleship with Jesus is helping others coming behind to consider the real-life implications of the Truth and practical instruction they are getting. That process, as we've already seen in the examples of David's walk with God and the apostles' with Jesus, is only really effective when the applications of Truth are not an end in themselves but part of the disciple being drawn into and equipped for God's purposes - being disciplined to make disciples.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the second question in the area of *Discipleship*, 'Are they being helped to apply the general Truth from God's Word to their own specific real-life situations?', we can also ask:

- *As they read, study, or hear God's Word being taught, do they see it as communication from a real Person who's always there and vitally interested in their daily lives, or is it more a religious activity they're participating in?*
- *Is there a conscious effort being made to evaluate and, where possible, adjust the form in which Truth is taught to the gathered church so that it encourages discipleship in the body?*
- *Are there opportunities made for smaller groups (including one-on-one scenarios) to process, discuss and make relevant, practical applications from the teaching that is being given to the whole church?*

## The third question under "D" for *Discipleship*

- Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?
- Are they being helped to apply the general truth from God's Word to their own specific real-life situations?
- Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?

- Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?
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## How does discipleship take place?

We said earlier that when we use the term *discipleship* we're encapsulating two related aspects:

- a) The relationship that exists between Jesus and His followers.
- b) The way that believers help each other in following Him.

In light of that simple definition, we can say that the more someone knows Jesus, has learned from Him, and is working closely with Him, the more able they are to help His other disciples do likewise.

The picture we should have of discipleship is of all His people aligned to follow Him, but with each on a unique path as He disciplines them within the reality of their personal story, social context, gifts and abilities, and of course how they respond to Him. But how does Jesus disciple them now that He's not physically on the earth? Well, we know it's through His Word as they have access to it (look back at Tutorial 7.6 for thoughts on what that *access* involves) and through His Spirit relating to their hearts and minds. But as we've noted many times, He graciously chooses to use human beings in His purposes, and this is most certainly true of discipleship. So in our mental image, we should picture each of His disciples on their own individual path, but with Him directing those paths to make multiple intersections with others. And in these convergences of His people, these relationships that are sometimes for a season and sometimes for a lifetime, He advances His discipleship goals for each of those involved.

As Romans 8:28 says, "we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them." This is true of every "chance" encounter, acquaintance and relationship. In His sovereign wisdom He is able to teach His children lessons through every interaction, even the ones that seem to have no purpose or are perhaps painful. So from His side - what we've described as (a) in our brief definition - all of those "intersections" of paths potentially contribute to what He intends for each disciple. But He also wants to involve them in a positive contribution, a purposeful cooperation, with Him in this process, the part that (b) in our definition refers to.

This aspect of discipleship - i.e., the part that Jesus' disciples themselves can play - is all about relationships. There are some rare instances of brief, life-changing conversations between relative strangers, and many believers are impacted by the testimonies of His servants down through history who they've never met in person, but as a rule the most meaningful and worthwhile interactions take place within relationships. By "relationships" we mean when there is enough time spent together to develop significant trust and openness. As we all know, those kinds of relationships, or *friendships*, don't just happen; they require both sides putting in the effort to develop and maintain them. But what is the difference between a standard, "common or garden" friendship and a genuine discipleship relationship? The wording of the W.I.L.D. question we're considering here addresses this by bringing *intention* or *intentionality* into the frame. That doesn't necessarily mean "planned", "structured" or "scheduled" - although none of those is inherently at odds with relational discipleship, as we'll discuss later.

## Intentional discipleship

Jesus' relationship with His disciples was a real one and we definitely see a genuine love and affection for these men coming through the Narrative. But He also had very clearly defined goals for His three years with them, as we can tell from what He reviews with the Father near the end of that time (John 17):

- reveal God to them (v. 6),
- pass on His message to them (v. 8),
- protect and guard them (v. 12),
- tell them things that will fill them with joy (v. 13),
- give them God's Word (v. 14),
- send them into the world (v. 18),
- unite them around a shared experience of God's glory (v. 22).

And His objectives for them were not only broad and generic. From the personal exchanges recorded in the Gospels it's not difficult to infer at least some of the specific areas in their lives He was helping them both to recognise and to grow in. Peter's impulsiveness, overconfidence and tendency to speak before thinking provide obvious examples, but there were many other instances of Jesus specifically addressing failures to trust Him, ambitiousness, narrow-mindedness, selfishness, etc.

Of course that was Jesus, right? He was God after all, and the disciples were following Him because they believed He was the Messiah. He had the right to identify and address areas of need in others. But how can His disciples today, conscious of their human weaknesses and sin, be confident that they can disciple someone else? Certainly the current of Western culture is against the idea of that kind of intentionality within a relationship; and not without good reason. There has been so much abuse of authority and people using their

positions to manipulate and dominate others, that many are wary of taking on the role of discipling others. This caution is a healthy one as long as it isn't crippling - certainly if someone has *not* wrestled with the question of exactly what gives them the right to disciple others, then they really aren't qualified to take that role.

But by faith, we have to be convinced that it is possible, despite all the human frailties involved, for there to be healthy discipleship relationships, genuine friendships that are also intentional. In some situations it is even profitable to have that defined; for someone younger in the faith to specifically welcome a brother or sister further along in their walk with the Lord to play that discipleship or *mentoring* role with them. In certain contexts, where someone is being equipped for a wider role in God's work, it can even be appropriate to have this take place within a structured program, with scheduled times together and predetermined topics to work through. But the dynamics in those more formalised situations create significant challenges that, although not insurmountable, require extra sensitivity and effort if it is to be truly a profitable friendship and not just part of a course or weekly schedule to tick off as "completed" in a "Leaders' guide" or on a productivity app.

Some of the essential ingredients that allow for intentionality within a discipleship relationship while guarding against it becoming unhealthy or just a form to be followed are: humility, genuine care and empathy, the desire to listen more than to speak, the ability to really hear what someone might have trouble articulating in words, and experience in following Jesus while putting faith into practice. Trust is the lifeblood of discipleship; without someone who is trustworthy and someone to trust them, discipleship doesn't take place. The trust has to be well founded and tested by the passing of some time, through the normal give and take of a relationship, in open, honest conversations, through vulnerability and through shared experiences.

But as we see through God's Narrative, and as experience teaches, effective discipleship doesn't happen in a vacuum. Intentional, relational discipleship is only really effective when there is a sense of a shared cause and purpose for the relationship. And the intention cannot only be one way. At very least, the starting point has to be a shared desire to follow Jesus more closely. Then, as time goes by and with His help, other more specific objectives can naturally emerge that give focus and incentive for both sides of the relationship. The "shared cause" then doesn't outgrow individual spiritual growth, but it begins to take on broader aspects related to God's local and global purposes. Further questions could be explored such as: what part does Jesus want this disciple of His to play? How has He gifted him or her? What ongoing equipping could they pursue? What are the values that will shape their lives and contribution to the Task? How can *they* themselves build discipleship relationships with others? But where discipleship is most effective and fulfilling, is where the



relationship actually develops “on the job” into genuine equality and a partnership of mutually trusted co-workers.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the third question in the area of *Discipleship*, ‘Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?’ we can also ask:

- *Is the subject of relational discipleship being taught and discussed in a way that communicates its true value and necessity in the life of individuals and the group?*
- *Are there those who, although very conscious of their own needs, are actively pursuing friendships with other believers with the purpose of encouraging them to follow Him as disciples?*
- *Are there opportunities for discipleship relationships to develop into genuine partnerships of equality and trust in the context of service?*

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Amber was a bit nervous but also excited; finally she was going to be involved in what she had been thinking about and preparing to do for so long - discipleship in Africa! It had been arranged for her to go twice a week and spend time teaching typing and computer skills, but also to help disciple girls at a vocational school. These girls from the poorest of poor families had been given this opportunity by a church-sponsored program to escape life in the slums, and she’d been told that they’d all made professions of faith.

Waiting at the bus stop among ladies in vivid dresses and matching head scarves, Amber reflected on the journey that had brought her here. It had all started when she was 17 and a missionary couple, working in West Africa, had come to her home church to speak to the youth group. She had been impacted by their challenge to obey Jesus’ command to make disciples and from then on she’d planned to do that in Africa. Her church leadership had been encouraging but recommended that she get some training first. At her Christian college she’d majored in Intercultural Studies, but her real passion had become discipleship. She’d researched then written an extensive paper on the subject and later, as she went about partnership development in her own church and elsewhere, she’d always highlighted discipleship as the thing she wanted to be involved in. When an opportunity came along to work with a church in Kano, the second biggest city in Nigeria, she’d jumped at it. Now, after settling in for four months in this huge bustling city, the senior pastor had asked if she would help out at the vocational school.

Yesterday, after the Sunday service, the pastor had introduced her to a lady with a disfiguring facial scar that she'd shared 'hellos' with at church but never actually spoken to. He said that Precious already knew the girls at the school and they'd be going there together the two days each week. Now, as Amber watched her approach along the crowded footpath, the thought crossed her mind that the Lord might have put them together regularly so she could encourage and disciple Precious.

On the hour long bus trip to their destination near Bagwai dam, Amber was surprised to find that Precious already knew each of the girls from the vocational school by name, and was able to provide some invaluable information about their background and educational levels. But more than that, she seemed to really care for them as individuals. Later that afternoon saying goodbye, it struck Amber that for the whole bus trip back to the city she'd been responding to gentle questions about how she'd found the first day and her impressions of the girls.

And that set the pattern for their two hour conversations each Monday and Thursday. She'd never wanted to be one of those people who just talk about themselves, but somehow Amber found herself opening up in a way she never really had with anyone else. It wasn't that Precious didn't share anything about herself. Over the next months her story emerged; that she and her husband were actually from a people group in the neighbouring country of Chad; and how, after their extended family had turned to Christ, their grass thatched houses had been torched at night and it was then her face had been badly burned. They also talked about the couple's dreams of being part of a church planting effort in their home area. But it was Amber's life that seemed to feature much more in the conversations; her turbulent adolescent years as her parents' marriage dissolved in acrimony, her desire to serve the Lord, the occasional bouts of loneliness she was experiencing here in Nigeria, even the kind of man she was looking for. They'd talk about the messages at church or what they'd read themselves in the Bible, and about what exactly it means for a young woman to follow Jesus as His disciple.

The other topic that Precious came back to most mornings as they rode out of town on the A9 and then on to dusty, bumpy rural roads, was the girls at the vocational school. What growth could they see in them? How could they help them in *their* walk with Jesus? How could they be real friends to them? Amber realised after a while that her picture of discipleship had changed. It wasn't that all the theory she'd written into her college papers - in what already seemed a lifetime ago - was wrong. And they still had the "Discipleship Hour" before Computer Class that she'd established in her first week, but it looked quite different to how she'd once imagined it. Watching Precious relate to the girls and seeing how they warmed to her, how they liked hanging out with her, how they opened up with occasional tears but with laughter ever present, how they listened so intently when she shared something from the Word or brought her

own relationship with the Lord naturally into the conversation...this was now the predominant image in Amber's mind when she thought of discipleship.

They'd been travelling to the school together for more than 18 months when Precious told her one morning that she and her husband were leaving Kano to go back to their home area in Chad. He'd finished his training as a translator and now they would be part of a Bible translation project in the language they'd grown up with. Amber was excited for them, knowing this had been on their hearts for years, but she realised she'd miss her friend deeply in the days ahead. On the bus alone a few weeks later, she smiled at the memory of that first morning when she'd prayed for an opportunity to disciple the lady with the scarred face walking towards her. In fact, it dawned on her now for the first time, that *she* had been the one who'd been helped most in following Jesus. Yes, she hoped she'd been some small encouragement to Precious, but she had learned far, far more than she had taught. Maybe, just maybe, she thought as she looked out the window at men in shiny suits on bicycles and ladies sitting under umbrellas selling oranges, she might just be ready to disciple others now herself.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*Applying Truth in the walk of faith*

1. In your own words describe a scenario in which members of a church are helped to apply teaching from God's Word in ways that relate directly to their daily situations. Is this mainly hypothetical for you or have you actually participated in something that you believe effectively moved towards discipleship in this way?
2. Imagine that you are serving in another country and have been asked to fill a role equivalent to "Dean of students" for your own gender at a Bible college. One of your stated responsibilities is to spend at least an hour each week in a discipleship session. What are some specific prayer points you think you might include in an email to your support network back home as you start into this new role?
3. Do you agree with the assertion that "Discipleship doesn't happen in a vacuum"? Please give your reasons and explain what you believe it means.
4. In Amber's story, what do you think might have been her picture of discipleship before meeting Precious and in what

key ways do you suspect it had shifted after their months together?