

THE DISCIPLES' PASSION

Growing up, I was extremely passionate about sports. At nearly every chance I got I was outside either shooting a basketball, throwing a softball, or running around something to win a prize. Quite frankly, sports consumed most of my life as a child. Sports were something my dad was very passionate about too. Wanting to be like him, I followed in his footsteps. I knew in order to excel at athletics I had to have a relentless devotion to my sport, so I would spend hours out in the driveway shooting hoops. I also spent a crazy amount of time on the golf course trying to improve my game. I knew the names of the women on the Olympic softball team and wanted to be just like them, so my glove and bat had those women's names on them. I once went to a game where Dot Richardson, a former Team USA softball athlete, was playing. My sister and I waited after the game for her to sign our ball. When she passed back that bright yellow softball with her signature on it, it felt like someone was handing me a piece of gold. I treasured that ball for many years.

We're going to take a look at a different sort of passion: a disciple's devotion and commitment to become just like their rabbi. While I was in Israel, John referred to this as "the disciples' passion." My prayer and hope are that you will be overwhelmed with a desire to become just like your Rabbi Jesus, propelled forward to pursue him with complete and total devotion.

During my time in ministry, I had the joy of ministering to a teenager named Kendell who shared the disciples' passion. Kendell was at the church every time the doors were open. There was a hunger inside of him that inspired me to follow Jesus with that same kind of radical obedience. I'm fairly certain that if Jesus were to show up on the scene today and go looking for disciples, he'd choose Kendell to be one of them.

Kendell was someone I and other leaders saw mature in faith before our very eyes. I watched him take courageous steps as he started overcoming deep fears in his life. Not only that, but Kendell was passionate about sharing his faith with others. He lost some friends over his devotion to Jesus, as they chose to walk a different path, but that didn't keep Kendell from pursuing the Lord. As he grew spiritually, he started co-leading the morning prayer group at the high school and opened up to our youth ministry by sharing his own struggles with loneliness and depression. Kendell shared with our group about his struggles with sin, what that looked like in his life, and how he wanted to live differently. Kendell did what any true disciple would have done: He took profound steps of faith, because his life was fully devoted to Jesus.

As Jesus traveled around the Judean countryside, he went looking for disciples, which in Hebrew are called *talmidim* (plural) or *talmid* (singular). The Jewish people understood that following a rabbi required a commitment that involved a person's whole being. Being a disciple meant accepting a challenge to give up everything to be just like the rabbi. Ray Vander Laan, a well-known teacher and scholar of first-century Judaism, writes the following about the day-in and day-out commitment a *talmid* would make to their rabbi:

A *talmid* followed the rabbi everywhere, often without knowing or asking where he was going. He rarely left his rabbi's side for fear that he would miss a teachable moment. And he watched the rabbi's every move, noting how he acted and thought about a variety of situations.¹

Furthermore, he adds, "the disciples' deepest desire was to follow their rabbi so closely that they would start to think and act like him."²

In our culture, we use a different approach in our schools and youth groups. When we want to share information, we'll put together an awesome teaching lesson or get kids to check off boxes on a test at school, thinking that we have made them good disciples or good learners. Sadly, sometimes our best efforts actually end up snuffing out the disciples' passion in young people.

In the culture Jesus lived in, being a disciple meant something much deeper than simply calling yourself one. Marv Wilson writes that "in Hebrew thought to 'know' something was to experience it."³ In other words, knowledge and experience went hand in hand. This is not common in our culture. Someone who shares the energy and commitment we call the disciples' passion is a person who's looking to experience the power of God. Some of our youth ministry programs lack the true power of God because bringing teenagers into an experience with the living God isn't our focus.

This is something I began thinking about a lot while I was in Israel. I didn't know how to move forward. I asked John for advice. "What should I do?" I wondered. "How can I bring what I've experienced into my youth ministry setting?"

"Heather," he said, "the first thing I would do is take your students on a walk, but don't tell them where you're going. After a while in silence and after you've gone some distance say to them, 'This is what it's like to follow Jesus. It means trusting him no matter where you're going. It means following him even though you don't know the destination.'" John was challenging me to take teenagers out of the classroom and into an experience. He was exhorting me to bring faith into action, teaching my teens what following a rabbi must have really been like.

The Greatest Commandment

The greatest commandment in Scripture helps us better understand what it meant in the past, and can mean now, to share in the disciples' passion. When asked, Jesus says the greatest commandment is this:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).

The original Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. *Nephesh* refers to something that encompasses every part of you, hitting at the deepest part of your inner being. In Sunday school, I taught our teenagers about the word *nephesh*. I had them imagine being Clark Kent becoming Superman, ripping open his button-down shirt to reveal his true identity. We each also have an inner self that we are growing for God, I explained. This inner being can grow as we learn to love the Lord with every single part of ourselves. With all of our *nephesh*. We can become Supermen and Superwomen for God! In doing so, we teach others how to grow the same kind of inner-person, living with the disciples' passion.

Looking for Talmid

The first-century Jewish community put learning into action. When a devout Jew learned, they were expected to apply their knowledge. To learn without application was not considered learning at all. “A *talmid* didn’t just repeat what the teacher said, they emulated in every way what the teacher is,” I remember John telling us one day in Israel. As Garr writes, “Originally the word *talmid* was applied to a student of music. This, of course, confirms to us that the disciple was not merely a repository for knowledge, for music is enjoyed only when it is performed.”⁴

In the first century, to be a *talmid* meant that your life was set apart. It meant something radical. It required not only someone’s intellect, but their time, energy, and devotion. It required the disciples’ passion, like what I saw in Kendell. Just as a devout Jewish person would have been devoted to the study of the Torah, the following of a rabbi would have required the same type of commitment and passion.

The Call to Follow

I believe North American youth ministry has missed the mark on making disciples because we spend our best efforts coming up with the most cutting-edge programs. When teenagers are attending those programs that’s often enough to make us feel accomplished—but is anyone’s heart swelling with the disciples’ passion? I have found that when my heart is focused on growing the ministry through highenergy programs, my own passion for Jesus starts to die at the hands of my self-inflicted exhaustion. Imagine if Jesus had spent all his time investing into a weekly program, going all in on a couple of hours packed with high-octane fun and a slam-dunk lesson—and then called it good until the next week. I’m sure he would have gathered some large crowds and put together some pretty awesome events, but would he have made disciples who changed the world?

As a rabbi, Jesus was someone who embodied the Torah. He was, in every way, a living example of God’s Word. He embodied what it meant to live with the disciples’ passion. Along with developing a Godly character, Rabbis in his time were fiercely devoted to God through their study and understanding of Scripture—and that’s what drew people to them. Their love, character, and devotion to God are what made people want to be their disciples.

I cannot lovingly stress to you enough how important the development of your character is. What will either draw people to you or repel them from you is your character. Therefore, your own personal growth in things like humility over your own personal struggles with sin, love for people caught in it, and grace for those who mess up (just like you) must be one of your highest pursuits if you want to make disciples.

Humility must be what guides you. Not pride, not entitlement or selfrighteousness, but a deep thankfulness that God would even think to use you for the task of making disciples.

Tverberg and Spangler write,

A disciple apprenticed himself to a rabbi because the rabbi had saturated his life with Scripture and had become a true follower of God. The disciple sought to study the text, not only of Scripture but of the rabbi’s life, for it was there that he would learn how to live out the Torah. Even more than acquiring his master’s knowledge, he wanted to acquire his master’s character, his internal grasp of God’s law.⁵

What about you? How are you attracting teens into your ministry? Is it through fun, games, loudspeakers, and awesome food? Or is it through a life so devoted to Jesus that others are

desperate to know him like you do? It's no wonder people left everything to follow Jesus. He was the most exciting person on the planet, and it wasn't because he had Lecrae on speed dial or a lifelong deal with Domino's for free pizza.

The disciples—the *talmidim*—sacrificed their lives to be just like their rabbi. In the first century, to give anything less than your whole self to your rabbi would have been considered disgraceful. That's why it's so painful when Peter denies Jesus three times. In Israel we learned that denying your rabbi three times in public was the same as saying "I am completely done with this person; they are dead to me." What about us as youth pastors and youth leaders? Are we sacrificing our lives to be just like our Rabbi Jesus? Or could it be that we're sacrificing our walk with God to find fulfillment in outwardly successful ministries instead?

Teenagers Like Kendell

How do we get more teenagers like Kendell in our ministries? For one thing, we have to be strategic in everything we do. If we truly want to make *talmidim*, then we must be willing to set the bar high, with lots and lots of grace for when our teenagers make mistakes. This is how Jesus did it. Even after Peter's denial, Jesus extended grace to him, reinstated him, and gave him even more leadership responsibilities. Our teens are going to fail too, so lots of grace will be needed. We must challenge them to take up brand-new lives of radical devotion to the Lord Jesus.

I can recall a teenager I had in my ministry. You could tell that he was toeing the line, not sure if he wanted to dive all the way in as a leader for Christ, but I knew he had the leadership qualities that if he did, God would use him greatly. I remember talking with him one day after he had been struggling in his faith and had made some pretty poor decisions. I said to him, "I want you to know that I believe in you. It's okay to fail, because I fail a lot too. We are here for you in the youth ministry, we love you, care about you and believe in you. I know that God is going to use your life greatly." I wanted to make sure he understood that I believed he had what it took to be used by God. Later that year I even challenged him to go into ministry, because I sensed the Lord impressing upon me to share that with him. I took the opportunity to challenge him by calling him up and calling him into a more radical life with Jesus. Now, this young man didn't respond as I hoped he would during that season, but I'm praying and hoping that someday, he will.

The Great Commission

The Great Commission is what many people claim as their ethos for discipleship. I wonder, however, if we truly understand, from a first-century context, just what Jesus meant when he left us with that final command: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Many of us look to this Scripture to formulate our purpose for discipleship. We say things like, "We want to make disciples who make disciples." That is good, but do we understand, fully, what Jesus is asking of us when he says to go and "make disciples"?

If we think of what the word disciple—or *talmid*, as we looked at earlier—would have meant to people in the first century, we can better understand the Great Commission. At its root, the word *talmid* means pupil or learner. At that time, the word carried an implication of devotion and discipline. To call oneself a *talmid* was to place oneself in a position of humility, as a student before your teacher. Do we see this in our own teenagers? If we truly want to make disciples who make disciples, we must first create an atmosphere that reproduces teachers *and* learners. Truly, we've missed the mark on what it means to make a disciple if we have not made learning part of our ministry praxis.

As a basketball referee with only a few short years under my belt I knew that in order to grow as an official I had to first become a learner. I had to observe people with more experience than me so I could grow in my trade. Once I did, not only did I improve as an official, but I became part of something bigger than myself—a network of other officials who were there to support and encourage me. I grew into a better official thanks to their investment in me. Growing as a disciple has a lot more to do with learning than we may think.

Becoming a disciple is no small calling, either. As I previously mentioned, the word for disciple carried an implication of devotion and discipline. Jesus asks a rich man to sell all he has and then come follow him. He challenges his listeners to take up their cross daily and follow him, because without doing so, they cannot be his disciples. 1 John 2:6 says, “whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” The rich man was unwilling to sell his possessions. The call to be a true disciple is easy in words, but hard in practice. In the long run, having a fuller understanding of the word disciple not only challenges us as youth workers to raise the bar of commitment and devotion and learning for ourselves, but also gives teenagers an opportunity to see someone who’s living as one of the disciples described within the Great Commission.

The Age of the Disciples

This invitation from Jesus to become *talmidim* was extended to a group of young people who changed the world. There have been questions and debates about the age of the disciples. A typical depiction in our Western world shows them to be old and bald, hunched over with a slight case of scoliosis. Based on these pictures the average person would understandably assume that the disciples were middle-aged men, probably in their forties or fifties. However, a deeper look at the Scriptures and the practices in the first century reveals a very different reality.

Most Jewish girls would start out in primary school and finish up by the age of ten. Jewish boys would continue on, but only the best of the best would get to the point where they followed a rabbi. If they weren’t the best of the best, then they would no longer continue on in the Jewish educational system and would instead start working in their father’s trade. Tverberg and Spangler observe,

By the age of thirteen most boys would have concluded their formal study and then begun to learn a trade. The most talented among them would have been encouraged to continue studying throughout their teenage years at the *bet midrash* (“house of interpretation”) at the synagogue until they married at the age of eighteen or twenty. Only the most brilliant would go on to become disciples of a great rabbi.⁶

The most elite students would approach a rabbi and ask if they could follow him. By observing a rabbi’s life, the potential disciples would have an idea of who they wanted to follow. It’s important to note that the rabbis were observing the students too. If a student came to a rabbi and requested to follow him, and the rabbi didn’t believe the student had what it took to do so, the rabbi had every right to say no. Here’s the cool thing about Jesus, though: He flips it all around. Instead of waiting for people to come to him, Jesus approaches people and asks them to follow him. In essence, Jesus says, “I think that you can be like me.” And if you notice, Jesus doesn’t go to the synagogue looking for the most elite students. He goes to the students no longer in the Jewish educational system. He goes to the dropouts, the ones who hadn’t made the cut! He goes to the people who are working in their fathers’ trades and calls them to be his followers! It’s no wonder they drop everything to follow after Jesus.

The disciples were not old men. They weren’t even middle-aged. Some may have been teenagers.

(I believe this to be the case. In Matthew 17:24-27, only Peter and Jesus pay the temple tax that was required by Jewish Law for people over the age of 20. This indicates that the other disciples were under the age of 20.) Not only that, but the typical age for someone to begin following a rabbi was during their teenage years.

David Bivins writes, “Formal education ended at the age of twelve or thirteen when most children went to work. The more gifted students who so desired could continue their studies at the bet midrash together with adults who studied in their spare time. A few of the most outstanding bet midrash students eventually left home to study with a famous rabbi.”⁷

Another insight into the age of the disciples is the only married disciple of the twelve we know of who followed Jesus was Peter. Most Jewish men were wed around the age of 18 or 20, so it makes sense that Peter, being the only married disciple and the only person to pay the Temple Tax with Jesus, would be the only disciple over the age of 20. Also, since it was customary for a young man to begin following a rabbi sometime during Bet Midrash, which began around the age of 13, it would, therefore, make plausible sense that the disciples started following Jesus sometime after that but before the age of 20.

Therefore, since Jesus followed the customs and culture of his day, we can safely assume that these young men (except for Peter) were teenagers. Isn't that amazing? Jesus called young people to come and be like him. He called them to change the world, and he's calling young people today to go and do the same.

A Brand-New Calling

I think it's time to rethink the words we use and the invitations we give our teenagers. In the typical vernacular, we might invite our teens to “ask Jesus into your heart and be saved.” What if instead we said something like this? “Jesus thinks that you can be like him. He's calling you to a brand-new life. It's a radical life where you let go of everything to become just like him.”

Jesus isn't looking for the brightest and the best intellectuals. He looks into the heart. We can see this in the story of God calling David to be the next king of Israel in 1 Samuel 16. The prophet Samuel is told by God to go to Jesse's house and anoint a new king. Samuel sees many strong, capable sons of Jesse, but finds no man worthy of kingship. Being strong and capable are not the traits God sought. Israel's future king, Jesse's youngest son, was out in the shepherd's field. It was not his stature, accomplishments, or prestige that made David God's chosen king. God saw in David the heart of a shepherd, tending to, protecting, feeding, and caring for his flock. In light of a story like this, it's no surprise that Jesus bypasses the most exceptional students in the synagogue and goes looking for disciples on a fishing boat and in a tax collector's booth.

Maybe some of your teenagers feel like their upbringing, family, or failures make them unworthy of being Jesus's disciples. Remind them that it's not their strength, stature, or prestige that make them worthy. It's God's grace through the Holy Spirit that empowers them to become like Jesus.

There's another teenager I know who shares the disciples' passion. Her name is Brynn. I think she would have been one of the women who found herself in the company of Jesus. She's a *talmidah* (female disciple) and is another one of those teenagers who is at the church every time the doors are open. She really loves Jesus and wants to be like him in every way possible. The thing I appreciate the most about Brynn is that she's quick to admit her failures. For a while, she strayed from Jesus and made some bad choices along the way. The cool thing about Brynn is that in her repentance, she's sharing her story with others with the hopes that they won't make some of the same decisions she did. That's the kind of heart that God is looking

for, a heart of humility. After all, in the company of Jesus were a doubter, a traitor, a big mouth, a couple of really prideful brothers, and a former prostitute. These are the kinds of people to whom Jesus said, “Come, follow me.”

If Jesus showed up on the scene today, he wouldn't go to the prestigious, aged pastors who've written a number of books, spoken on many podcasts, and built large ministries for themselves. He'd go to your youth group and look for a Kendell or a Brynn. He'd look for teenagers with hearts like David's, Joshua's, Ruth's, and Esther's. He'd go searching for the ones who might be overlooked in other areas of their lives, but who want to be just like Jesus in every way possible.



Endnotes

- ¹ Ray Vander Laan, “To Be a Talmid,” That the World May Know (website), www.thattheworldmayknow.com/to-be-a-talmid (accessed November 2019).
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Wilson, Our Father Abraham, Ch. 14.
- ⁴ Garr, “Lamed—The Tallest Letter.”
- ⁵ Spangler and Tverberg, Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus, Ch. 1.
- ⁶ Spangler and Tverberg, Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus, Ch. 2.
- ⁷ David Bivin, New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insights from His Jewish Context (Holland, MI: En-Gedi Resource Center, Inc., 2007), Kindle edition, Ch. 1.

