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Connect

The Disciple-Making Temperament

If conversion to Christianity makes no improvement in a man's outward actions—if he continues to be just as snobbish or spiteful or envious or ambitious as he was before—then I think we must suspect that his “conversion” was largely imaginary.

—C. S. Lewis

I saw a movie several years ago in which a story was told about a young aspiring magician. When the magician was a teenager, he approached the mayor of the town and asked him to pull a card from a deck and sign his name to the card. To the mayor's amusement, the boy performed a simple sleight-of-hand trick with the signed card. The mayor chuckled and congratulated the boy on his craft, and he went on his merry way.

However, the young aspiring magician had a much bigger plan than mastering simple card tricks. He took the card that the mayor had signed and stuck it into a

hole in a tree. Over many years, the tree grew around the card, enclosing the card in the center of the large tree.

Thirty years later, the mayor, now the governor of the state, returned to the town. The magician was now a grown man and rather well known within the region, but the governor had long forgotten his interaction with the magician several decades before. The magician approached the governor and asked him to pull a card from a deck and sign his name to the card. Using sleight of hand, he made sure that the governor pulled the same card that he had pulled thirty years prior, and he made sure that the governor signed the card in the same place as before. The magician pocketed the card and then asked someone to cut down the tree in the center of the town. The governor was astonished to find that his card was growing in the center of the tree (of course, he didn't realize this was the card from thirty years prior). The magician instantly became a legend, and the townspeople spoke of his incredible trick for years to come.

What I find inspiring about this story is that the magician had an idea for an amazing trick that required him to be patient for *thirty years* to see it through to fruition. I wish that Christians had this same kind of patience and vision when it came to forming disciples. I often find that Christians who have a zeal and desire to spread the Gospel can do more damage than good when they lack the appropriate temperament.

If you were only responsible for making one disciple of Jesus Christ, you have the freedom to think long term and see the bigger picture. Every person on earth

is given a lifetime to become a saint, and everyone's journey is different. We can see examples of the diversity of faith journeys when looking at the lives of different canonized saints. For some, such as St. Thérèse of Lisieux, holiness is a part of the narrative of their entire lives. For others, such as St. Dismas—who was crucified next to Jesus and repented of his sin moments before his death—sanctity happens at the very end of life. The key is that a person who seeks to walk with another has to recognize that they are along for the journey.

If you wish to make a lifelong disciple of Jesus Christ, you have to be committed to the whole journey. You have to be *willing* to accompany someone throughout their lifetime. This is a big commitment.

Accompaniment

If you work in ministry or you are at your local church a lot, you are probably familiar with many of the buzzwords of the present day. Terms such as *New Evangelization*, *discipleship*, and *accompaniment* are some of the terms that I frequently hear used in conversations with ministry professionals. Understanding terms and definitions is important because it helps us distinguish the kind of ministry that we are talking about in certain situations.

I once got a bit cross with a colleague of mine, Mark, when he misused one of these terms. The conversation went something like this:

Mark: I recently read your book on youth ministry. You wrote a wonderful book on accompaniment.

Me: Thank you. But I haven't written a book on accompaniment. I wrote a book on discipleship.

Mark: Well . . . they are the same thing.

Me: No! They are not! Discipleship refers to a method of ministry where a rabbi has an intentional mentoring relationship with a small number of selected people. Accompaniment is simply walking or journeying with a person through their life. Accompaniment is a necessary part of discipleship, but it is not the same thing.

I probably startled Mark a bit with my response, but I wanted to make a point. This distinction between the words *accompaniment* and *discipleship* is important. If we don't understand the difference between discipleship and accompaniment, we don't understand the goal of what we are doing and why we are doing it. If you wish to disciple someone, you accompany them so that you may understand them and help them to know that they are understood. A person will never trust or follow the advice of a teacher if they do not first know that they are understood. Accompaniment is the first step for establishing discipleship, but it doesn't complete the work of discipleship. (I will share more on the following steps later in the book.)

God embodies accompaniment in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. God does not seek to save humanity by keeping a safe distance from sin and the flesh. Rather, God becomes flesh and enters into every part of the human experience (except sin). We know that God

understands every facet of what it means to be human because he *is* human.

The one thing that Jesus did not share in was sin, and yet his temperament toward the sinner is not one of judgment. I bring up sin because Jesus's temperament toward sin is a necessary temperament to have if accompaniment is to be successful.

Jesus, Sin, and the Lepers

When Jesus walked the earth, one of the greatest diseases of the time was leprosy. If a person contracted this disease, they were forced to live apart from the rest of humanity because they were contagious. Lepers lived in colonies with one another and were considered "unclean." In the book of Leviticus, God tells Moses what is supposed to happen to a person who is unclean: they are quarantined from society because they are contagious; anyone who would touch them immediately became unclean as well (Lv 13:1–2, 44–46).

Jesus turns this mindset on its head. In the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus meets a leper, he reaches out, touches him, and says, "Be made clean" (Mk 1:40–45). Jesus does not catch the man's leprosy. Rather, the man catches Jesus's purity. Rather than Jesus becoming ill, the opposite occurs—the leper becomes well.

This is also an illustration of the relationship that Jesus has with sin and the sinner. Jesus enters into humanity but he does not "catch" humanity's sinfulness. Also, he does not keep a safe distance from the sinner and shout "Unclean" at them. Rather, Jesus is not afraid to touch the sinner because he cleanses each person of their sins. Jesus accompanies humanity by

entering into our very experiences. He comes close to us and he cleanses us.

Jesus Meets Simon, the Sinner

Jesus's temperament with sinners is very important to understand, particularly when we consider his relationship with Peter. The first time Jesus meets Simon the fisherman (who would one day be named Peter), Simon warns Jesus to keep a safe distance away from him.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus performs a fishing miracle in the presence of Simon, who responds, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). It is as if Simon Peter were a leper and he is warning Jesus that he is "unclean." Jesus doesn't keep his distance. On the contrary, Jesus comes closer to Simon and says, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). There is no judgment from Jesus and no fear of the sinner. Jesus doesn't keep a safe distance; he dives right in.

Perhaps you have heard the common Christian cliché "Hate the sin but love the sinner." The problem with this statement is that those that I have heard use it are usually light on the love of the sinner and they double down on the hate of the sin. This phrase is frequently the catchphrase of Christians who love to cast judgment on others because of their sins. It's like the person is saying, "I love you, but here is my loophole to justify judging you." This cliché doesn't accurately describe the temperament of Jesus. He did much more than what many of us think of as *love*. Rather, he demonstrated that love doesn't have a loophole. Jesus got close to the sinner. He touched the sinner. If we wish to imitate

Christ's example, we have to be willing to touch the sinner as well.

Our Pharisee Problem

If you read the gospels, there is only one kind of person that Jesus is ever hard on: the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees. These were the religious leaders of the time. In the Bible, the Pharisees are quick to judge and condemn and slow to help others. They think that they know better than Jesus, and ultimately they are the ones who hand over Jesus to be crucified. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees, saying, "You lock the kingdom of heaven before human beings. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter" (Mt 23:13). Think about this: Jesus was merciful with the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the woman caught in adultery, the promiscuous Samaritan at the well, the pagan centurion, and the Roman soldiers who tortured and killed him. Who were the people that Jesus condemned? The self-righteous.

I am concerned by what I see in today's Church. I see many supposedly devout Christians who more closely resemble the Pharisees than they do Christ. I see bishops, clergy, religious, and laity who are more willing to condemn the sinner to hell than get close to the sinner. I see social media inundated with Catholics who sit behind the safety of their keyboards and lecture others about right and wrong while parish ministries struggle to find enough volunteers to run the simplest of ministries—ministries that actually help people. I see faithful Catholic families who try to create safe Catholic

bubbles for their children rather than engage the community and witness to those around them.

I have been doing ministry with the faithful for a long time. In all my years of ministry, I have never met someone who has said that their heart was converted because someone lectured them on Facebook or Twitter. However, if you go on these social media channels, you will find all kinds of Christians condemning, insulting, arguing, and preaching down to others.

I have never seen a Catholic pro-choice politician who amended their ways and repented because a bishop or priest called them a heretic and punished them. Despite this strategy having a zero percent success rate, I know many Christians who want to see their bishops do just that.

I have never met a Protestant who converted to Catholicism because a Catholic came after them and harassed them with biblical rebuttals they learned from their study of apologetics. Starting a conversation with “Let me tell you why you are wrong . . .” isn’t an act of love.

I have never met a Catholic community that converted others because they created a Catholic bubble where they could safely stay apart from all the world’s influences. Jesus commanded us to go out and make disciples, not isolate ourselves from the rest of the world.

Anger doesn’t evangelize.

Trolling isn’t a ministry.

Know-it-alls engage no one.

Christianity is not a gated community.

What does work? Reaching out and touching the sinner. I think there’s a reason that Christians are afraid

to do this. When we reach out to the sinner, we communicate to them that “I am with you for the journey of your life, even if it means that I accompany you for your *whole* life.” It’s like the magician who waited thirty years to execute his greatest trick. Accompaniment requires a temperament of patience and commitment.

One of the reasons the Pharisee doesn’t succeed is because he is lazy. The Pharisee wants to convert people without any personal cost or commitment. But the problem goes further than laziness. The Pharisee isn’t invested in actually helping the sinner. He is happy to recite Church teaching and tell the sinner what they are doing is wrong, casting judgment and condemnation on the sinner. Christ doesn’t do this. Christ carries the burdens of the sinner. Christ enters into the sinner’s life. Christ shows mercy and seeks to understand and be understood.

Before we can even consider all the different steps that it takes to form a lifelong follower of Jesus Christ and his Church, we must first evaluate ourselves and our temperament. Having a temperament like the Messiah is the only attitude that works when it comes to forming saints in the ways of discipleship. Reaching our potential as saints involves becoming like Christ. If we are to show someone the path toward greater union with Christ, we have to first show them what it means to be Christlike. This means we have to be willing to reach out and touch the life of the sinner and accompany them on their long journey. This is what Jesus did. To be successful, we must do the same.



Do I Have the Right Temperament?

Take this brief self-assessment to help you evaluate whether your temperament is that of the Messiah or a Pharisee.

- Do I waste time on social media engaging in debates over religion, dogma, and/or faith?
- Have I insulted or cast judgment on someone (either in person or online) because of their sin, political views, or behavior?
- Do I engage in friendships or relationships outside of my Christian community?
- When I see someone act in a sinful manner, is my heart moved to compassion and pity for the person or am I immediately angered by their behavior?