

First Things First: Series Introduction

Zech 9:16-17 "The LORD their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. How attractive and beautiful they will be!"

I want to begin a series of messages designed to share my heart with you. In one sense, every sermon I preach reflects my heart; it reflects where I am in my relationship with God on any given subject. But this is different. I want to share with you what God has laid on my heart as it relates to the direction of our church. And so I'm calling this series of messages "First Things First." This isn't a plan with a timeline and pie charts—this is a look at what God has been stirring in my heart. And the first thing, out of all the first things, that God has laid on my heart is the preeminence of discipleship. This morning I want to preach on discipleship from our text in Zechariah, so I've titled this message Discipleship: The Crown Jewel. But first we need to have some sort of working definition of discipleship. So what is a disciple?

What Is A Disciple?

In Matthew 10:25 Jesus says, "It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master." Discipleship is an obsessive desire to become like another person in every facet of life. In discipleship, there is always a master and a disciple; there is always some to be followed and someone to follow. Probably one of the best non-biblical analogies is Star Wars. The most famous Jedi-master of all time would have to be Master Yoda, the small green man with wispy hair that struggles with English syntax. There's also Master Qui-Gon Jinn and his Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi. If you remember the movies, the master and the disciple went everywhere together—they did everything together—they ate and talked and fought and celebrated together, because the student wanted to become like the master.

A disciple is someone who is consumed with becoming like their master—they want to think like their master thinks. They want to respond the way their master responds, whether they're responding to praise or criticism or difficulty. They want to look at the world the way their master looks at the world. They want to order their day the way their master orders their day. They want to spend their time and their money the way their master spends his time and his money. Their desire is to become who their master is.

Now maybe it would help if I described what discipleship is not. It's not going to every seminar given by some particular person to gain insight into their skills in some particular field. It's not reading every book they write. It's not listening to every pod cast they publish. And here's why that's not discipleship: because when the seminar is finished and the book is done and the pod cast is over, you're not going to follow that person home after the seminar to eat dinner with them every night, or go to the store with them while they buy groceries, or spend evenings together with them and their family. In fact, if you try to do that, you can be sure way to get a free night in the slammer and an all-expense paid psychiatric evaluation.

No, a disciple is not interested in learning a skill—they're obsessed with copying someone else's life right down to the very last detail. Discipleship should be our life's obsession, no matter what our life's vocation. And I cannot help but ask myself the question, what is my life's obsession? When I boil everything else down, and strip away all my pursuits, what is it that I really want my life's legacy to be? I want to be a disciple! What is the obsession of your life? What is the obsession of our church's life? But there's another question that intrigues me about discipleship and will help us get to where we're going. Why does God want disciples, anyway?

Why Does God Want Disciples?

Why does God want people who are completely sold out to him in every area of their lives? Why

is it not enough to have people with whom he has a contract for mutual benefit? Because if we're honest—if I'm honest—there are times that's exactly what we want—God, I'll do this and this for you and in return you do this and this for me. God, I'll worship you to a reasonable extent if you will bless me and give me a good life. God's refusal to barter away his relationship with us has everything to do with God's glory.

Let me read 2 Sam 7:22-24 for you. It says, "22How great you are, O Sovereign LORD! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. 23And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? 24You have established your people Israel as your very own forever, and you, O LORD, have become their God."

From the very beginning of God's dealing with people, God has revealed his glory to his creation. In the Garden of Eden that glory was immediate and unfiltered and untarnished by sin. It was all around, all the time. But when sin entered the world man's relationship with God was broken, and man was sent out from the presence of God. And since that time God has been revealing his glory through his people. Notice what these verses say, that God went out and redeemed a people for himself, or for his benefit, so that he could make a name for himself and perform awesome wonders in their midst, so that he could show that the gods of the Canaanites were not gods at all.

Of all the ways that God can reveal his glory, he chooses to reveal it in the midst of his people. But for God to reveal his glory through his people, he must have a people who have given themselves fully and completely to him—people who live according to His Word and according to His will that has been made known in that Word.

That's why God wants disciples, because it's his chosen method of revealing his glory. Our lives, surrendered to Him, reveal His glory to the rest of the world. And that is where we pick up the theme of the crown jewels in Zechariah.

The Crown Jewels

Let's explore this image that Zechariah uses to describe the people of God. Zechariah, like most of the other prophets, had the unpleasant job of proclaiming God's judgment against his people because of their sin and their neglect of his Law. However, after the message of judgment came a message of hope. After a message of death and destruction and terror came a message of tenderness and love and gathering. God would not judge his people forever, nor would he leave them in a state of suffering. Instead, God promised to gather the remnant—the people he had chosen to rebuild with, the people completely devoted to Him and His word—and he would make that remnant into something that would reflect his beauty and his glory.

Zechariah 9:16-17 says, "16The LORD their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. 17How attractive and beautiful they will be!" Zechariah describes God's purged people—let's call them Old Testament disciples—as the jewels in a magnificent crown. As Americans, we don't particularly get into crowns and scepters and rings and orbs and all that, because with a crown comes a king or queen. But if you've ever had a chance to see any crown jewels you'll know that they're magnificent—their beauty is really a sight to behold. It's difficult not to stare because they are so spectacular. And kings and queens wear them as a display of their glory.

The Bible describes God as a mighty king, clothed in glory and majesty, crowned with you and me. Come again? Crowned with you and me? Yes, God's people are the jewels that radiate his glory. His people are what others can't take their eyes off—not because we're glorious in ourselves, but because of what God has done in

our midst. The New Testament is no different than the Old Testament as far as it relates to God raising up a people for himself to reflect his glory. In Acts 15 Paul and Barnabus recount the story of how God had done miraculous signs and wonders among the Gentiles, and here's what James says, "*God has taken from the Gentiles a people for himself (Acts 15:14).*" All God's people—Israel, the church, Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free, men, women—all of them are the jewels in God's crown meant to display his glory.

Which leads me to the question, how brilliantly do I reflect God's glory to the world around me? What does God's crown, with me in it, look like? When others look at me do they see the glory of God, or is God's glory obscured beneath the facets of my life that have not been cleaned and polished? I want to be jewel that radiates God's glory, but I can only do that as I submit to becoming a disciple. So how do we become disciples? I will share much more at a later time, but let me share three things with you quickly.

We Become Disciples By Becoming Vulnerable To Each Other

It's impossible to become a disciple without being vulnerable with each other. How do we confess our sins to each other and pray for each other without being vulnerable? How do we encourage one another daily and spur each other on toward love and good deeds without being vulnerable? How do we ever see the areas in which we need to grow, and how do we allow others in the body of Christ to build us up, if we are not vulnerable before God and before each other? Discipleship is team sport.

And if you're wondering whether I like to be vulnerable, I'll tell you, not really. I don't like my stuff out there in front of everyone any more than the next person. In fact, it's much easier to live out my life without others watching. But I want to be a disciple—I want to reflect God's glory—more than I want to be safe, more than I want to be admired without just cause, and more than I want to be comfortable. I want to do whatever it

takes to become a disciple.

We Become Disciples By Allowing Ourselves To Be Held Accountable

We just went from bad to worse, didn't we? When we allow ourselves to be held accountable, then we give other people permission to help us in our discipleship journey. Vulnerability opens up our lives to others, but accountability allows them to help us make strides toward growing in our relationship with God. Now don't get me wrong...we cannot be vulnerable with everyone to the same degree, nor can we hold people accountable who do not want to be held accountable. Vulnerability and accountability are choices that we make in order to help us on our spiritual journey. But vulnerability and accountability are critical to our growth in discipleship.

Paul tells the Galatians, "*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Gal 6:1-2).*" How can anyone know that we are caught in sin if we do not let them know, and how can they help us overcome that sin if we do not allow them to hold us accountable in the future? Paul tells the Thessalonians to be awake and alert and ends by saying, "*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1Thess 5:11).*" How can we encourage each other and build each other up in our areas of struggle if we do not share those areas and allow others to see how we're doing and call us to account? Accountability is absolutely critical when it comes to our growth in discipleship.

We Become Disciples By Giving Discipleship Our Best Resources

Discipleship is a lot like life; you can tell what gets people's best effort and what gets just enough effort to get by. If we were to take a little tour of all of our homes this morning, we would be able to tell which of you give your best resources to your lawn. Right? Some of you have lawns where there's not one blade of grass that is out of line. Nor is there a blade of grass that is

more than one shade different color than another blade. Or, heaven forbid, a blade of grass that spills over on to the sidewalk. And then there are others of you that would drive the aforementioned people out of their mind, because when people look at your lawn, the first thing that comes to their mind is, "so that's what a prairie rehab looks like. I didn't know they were doing that in residential areas." Your grass is a mixture of various types of weeds and it's growing everywhere—and you're just fine with it, because you're worried about other things.

Discipleship is like that. There are a lot of things that churches can give their time and their money and their effort to. And most of the things that churches give their effort to are good things, but not all of them are equally effective in making disciples. Some churches are great at community relations and everyone knows who they are, but a church can be well-known and well-respected in a community and still not be producing disciples. Some churches are great at drawing large crowds for worship, and that's wonderful, but a church can draw large crowds for worship and still not be producing disciples. Some churches are great at spreading political or social influence, but a church can spread political and social influence and still not be making disciples. To be a church that focuses on making disciples is to be a church that not only says yes to the things that are most effective in making disciples, but says no to the things that are not effective in making disciples, even though they may be wonderful things in themselves. God is calling us to make disciples and give it everything we have.

Jesus has called us to make disciples of all nations. That means our job is to fashion and shape and mold and polish disciples who are the jewels in God's crown, so that when other people look at us they see the glory of God. May God strengthen us for that challenge.

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The Crown Jewel
Zechariah 9:16-17

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