

Matthew 23:1-7

When Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “²The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. “⁵Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’

Last week we talked about the preeminence of discipleship—how being consumed with becoming like Jesus should be the passion of our life no matter what we do for a living. We talked about the fact that discipleship should get our best resources—the best of our time, our money, and our effort.

But how do we really sustain our efforts to become disciples? How do we make sure that becoming a disciple isn’t just another New Year’s Resolution? Because if we can be sure of anything, we can be sure that at some point in our journey we’ll become tired. We can be sure that at some point in our journey our passion for discipleship will begin to wane. And it will be much easier to start pursuing other things that capture our attention. So how do we sustain our efforts over the long haul? The answer to this first thing is found in the first commandment, which reads, “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength* (Deut 6:5).”

If there’s anything that will prevent us from making consistent strides in our growth in discipleship—loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving the world—it will be that the fire of our love for God begins to cool; it will be that our first

love, the first L, will begin to burn down. And so if we hope to make discipleship preeminent and to keep discipleship preeminent, then we must be people who continually stoke the flames of our love for God, renewing our passion and zeal for him on a regular basis. But before we talk about how to do that, let me share what happens if we pursue discipleship apart from a deep love for God above anything else.

Discipleship Becomes A Competition

Aside from the twelve or the 120 disciples, what group of people do you think embodied the highest level of discipleship in the world of Jesus’ day? Who was at the absolute top of the pile? The Pharisees and teachers of the Law! Question number two; what was the name of the most famous Pharisee in the Bible, one of the greatest of the greatest disciples? The Apostle Paul.

Listen to what Paul says in Philippians 3:4-6. “*“⁴If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”* Paul was a Pharisee and he never renounced being a Pharisee that we know of. Paul never claimed that everything the Pharisees did was wrong, because so much of what they did was to try to live their lives out in accordance with the Word of God. And to such a large extent they were successful. And what could possibly be wrong with that? Their love was misplaced!

One of the dangers of striving to become a disciple and not carefully maintaining an intense love for God, is that we’ll actually become a disciple, but our love will be misplaced and we will love our own glory and live for our own glory rather than living for God’s glory. And when that happens, things get really ugly, really quickly. Let me give you a picture of ugly.

I can’t think of a better snapshot of discipleship gone wrong than Matthew 23. Jesus is talking about the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, and you have to realize that they are the *creme de la creme*. But in Matthew 23:5 Jesus makes this telling statement about them: “*everything they do is done for men to see.*” Everything they do is done for their own glory. Everything they do is done to show their superiority to those around them. Everything they do is done to draw attention to themselves.

And Jesus begins to list everything they do for their own glory: they dress for their own glory, they find the places of honor at social events, they use their own titles and, if that’s not bad enough, they make others use them as well, they make it hard for others to become disciples because then their standing would be diminished, they tithe because it is measurable and public, yet disregard the important matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, they focus on what other people can see, while neglecting what only God can see, and when God sends prophets to call them to repentance they persecute those who come speaking the words of God. I can’t think of a better description of discipleship gone wrong.

I pray that God would never allow my walk with him on the outside to exceed my love for him on the inside—because when that happens, trouble is not far away. But competition is not the only danger. The other danger of becoming disciples without stoking the flames of our love for God is that discipleship become drudgery.

Discipleship Becomes Drudgery

Have you ever been a part of something that was pure, unmitigated drudgery? One of my college jobs in Springfield, Missouri was working at Sweetheart Cup. Do you know what Sweetheart Cup makes? They make cups—cardboard cups covered in wax and shipped to all the Taco Bells

and McDonald’s and Wendy’s in the midwest. And my job there consisted of one thing—for twelve hours a night I picked up sleeves of cups from the end of the line and put them into a box 3 feet behind me until the box was full. And then I pushed it back and another box dropped down and I did the very same thing again. It was PURE drudgery, and I smelled like a crayon every morning when I left work. I nearly lost my mind.

My work did not flow from a love for anything. I didn’t particularly love the company. I didn’t love the work. I didn’t really care so much where fast food restaurants got their cups. There was no grander scheme. The only love was the love I had for providing for Keri and me, and I could do that in any number of other ways. And if our love for God begins to cool down, and we don’t continue on in order to promote our own glory, then the work that’s involved in becoming passionate disciples will seem more and more like drudgery and we’ll eventually quit. I think that’s what happened to the church in Ephesus. Listen to what Jesus has to say to them:

Rev 2:1-5 says, “*“¹To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ⁴Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”*

What do you think it would have been like to live among the church described in Revelation 2:1-3? They worked hard. They persevered. They were doctrinally pure. That couldn’t be too bad, could

it? I think it could have been a fairly miserable place to be. I think it could have been a place devoid of the joy of worship fueled by an uncontrolled love for God. I think it could have been pretty lifeless. But it doesn't really matter what you or I think because God said that very lack of love would be enough for Him to remove His presence from them. Think of it! All those great qualities of the Ephesian disciples, and yet God said it wasn't enough.

The difference between discipleship and drudgery is the extent of our love for God. Becoming a disciple is difficult and it can be painful. We have to deal with things that sometimes we've spent considerable time and energy to avoid dealing with. We have to change certain things. We have to make certain sacrifices. And if we do not keep the fire of our love for God stoked and burning strong, discipleship will become drudgery and we will leave the work uncompleted.

There are so many other things that happen when our love for God grows cool. We no longer love our neighbor as we should—we no longer rejoice in the work of God's hands—the people that he has created and loves so dearly. We no longer have a passion and zeal for serving the world—not only meeting the needs of those who are suffering, but spreading the good news of what God has done. Everything breaks down. Everything becomes twisted. So how do we keep the fires of our love for God burning as hot as ever? We must always be fueling the fire of our love for God by remembering our story.

Remember Your Story

I want to take you back to the context of Deuteronomy 6, because the context is everything. The context of the first commandment reminds us that our love for God, and thus our motivation for becoming a disciple, is a response to what He has done in our lives. We don't decide to become disciples. We don't decide to become who God

wants us to be. We respond to what God has already done.

God didn't give the first commandment to the Israelites while they were making bricks in the land of Egypt. In fact, God didn't ask the people to do anything because they didn't know who He was—they had forgotten him. When Moses got there he had to explain which God had sent him to deliver them. No, in fact, God delivered the people from the hand of the Egyptians by a series of amazing signs. He provided for their every need. He preserved their lives in the midst of extreme adversity, and he brought them to the place of freedom and blessing. He loved them and took care of them and then taught them how to respond to him appropriately—which for our purposes, we might call discipleship.

The changes we make as a part of becoming a disciple must be made out of a heart of love for God, because of what he has done in our lives. And if we get to the place where the changes have become drudgery, then we must go back to our own story of God's grace and his love in our lives, so that our journey once again becomes a loving response rather than a mechanical duty.

Let me give you some examples of what that might look like? Let's say that your worship seems to have become routine and you're distracted. You can try to muster your will power and say, "I should worship. I ought to do this." And that may help for a while, but it won't last. But what if you went back to your own story and said, "God you saved me when I was your enemy. You have been merciful to me. You have done for me what I cannot do for myself. I want to worship you as a response of love to you." That's better than all the "should's" you throw at yourself, it's more pleasing to God, and it's sustainable.

Let's say that loving other people has become very difficult. They're so imperfect and hurtful.

You can try to muster your willpower and say, "I know I should love them. It shouldn't matter what they do. God commanded me to love them." And maybe that will help for a little while. But what if you went back to your own story and said, "God, I thank you that you have loved me in spite of the fact that I hurt you so deeply. Thank you for loving me even though I can be so difficult and stubborn. God I want to love this person as a response of love to you." When you look at your own story, loving others becomes easier.

Let's say serving other people has become very difficult. The people you're trying to serve don't like the church and their lives are filled with wickedness. You can certainly try to muster your willpower and say, "I know I should love them. I know I should show the love of Christ to them. It shouldn't matter what they're like." And maybe that will help you. But what if you looked at your own story and said, "God thank you for loving me when I hated you, and I hated your church, and I was wicked and far away from you. Lord I want my service to others to be a response of love to you."

Let me close this morning by asking you three questions:

1. Who or what do you love the most? If we love anything more than God, our discipleship will end one of two ways: we will find it to be drudgery and we'll quit, or we'll press on and become proud of our own accomplishments.
2. Has your journey become stagnant? Have you stalled in certain areas of your growth as a disciple? Have particular areas become very difficult? If so, rekindle your love for God and he will help you press through whatever issue you're facing.
3. Do you realize that God loves you so much that he has paid the price for your sins, so that you can have a relationship with him?

