

## Layne

As Evan and I speak on the topic, “Discipleship in the Digital Age,” I have a question for us. “*What does it look like for you and me to live as disciples of Jesus?*” In his book, Analog Church, Jay Kim writes, “*The church has always been most dynamic and effective when she has stood in stark contrast to the dominant culture of the day—zigging when the world is zagging. This sort of prophetic posture is what we need most in the digital age.*” P. 26 “*Zigging when the world is zagging*”...I like that. In the language of the Bible, we’re called to be foreigners and exiles. Listen to the words of the Apostle Peter from 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 9-12:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 1 Peter 2:9-12

So, how are we doing at living our lives in such a way that those who don’t know Jesus see our good deeds and glorify God? Are we living like foreigners and exiles, or, do we look like everyone around us? It’s well documented that a complaint non-Christians have about Christians is that they view us as hypocrites—they see inconsistency between what we say and what we do and between how we live our lives and how Jesus lived. People outside of faith in Christ have been known to observe Christians’ lives and say, “*I have no problem with Jesus, but the lives of Christians I know look nothing like Jesus’ life.*”

In her book, A People’s History of Christianity, Diana Butler Bass points out that the primary characteristic of followers of Jesus in the early church was their hospitality and the love they showed to the people around them, especially to those who were hurting and broken. Butler Bass writes, “*Throughout the first five centuries people understood Christianity primarily as a way of life in the present, not as a doctrinal system or promise of eternal salvation.*” She goes on to point out that pagans and Christians identified followers of Jesus by their willingness to help the poor and sick, even at the risk of their own lives.

In a 2nd Century letter the Emperor Julian—known as Julian the Apostate due to his hatred of Christianity—tells his pagan priests that they need to start caring for the poor like the Christians are, so they can win more people to their religion. He noted that Christianity was growing so rapidly, because of how impressed people were by the love Jesus’ followers showed to those who were diseased and dying, whether those they helped were Christians or not.

And the Epistle to Diognetus (Di-og-knee-tus), which was written in the 2nd or 3rd Century, explains...

The Christians are distinguished neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe...They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. They share all things with others.

They marry; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They love all, and are persecuted by all. They are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice.” Pp. 74 & 75 Butler Bass

So how are we doing? Are we being shaped by Scripture, the example of Jesus and the leading of the Holy Spirit or are we being primarily shaped by the culture around us? A troubling observation I’ve made over the past 3-4 years through COVID and our last presidential election is that followers of Jesus in our country on both sides of the political aisle have embraced hatred and vitriol and polarization in a way that has made our lives indiscernible from those outside of church. We’ve failed to zig when the world is zagging.

### **Evan**

As we talk about “Discipleship in the Digital Age” and what it looks like – and does not look like – to be people who purposefully and carefully live against the grain of the dominant culture ... I think a helpful starting place would be to clarify what we mean by “discipleship.” For some, that word is very familiar and clear ... maybe *so familiar* that you’ve actually lost sight of its true meaning ... for others, discipleship might be new or unclear. Either way, it’ll be good for us to all be on the same page.

If you were around for a sermon series we did last year, you might recognize this simple phrase: Becoming Like Jesus. We could use all sorts of terminology to define discipleship but at the end of the day, I think the simplest way to talk about discipleship is that: it’s the process of *us becoming like Jesus*. One of the reasons I like that idea is that it implies a *personal* transformation – both an inward and an outward change ... in worldview, in attitude, in behavior. **1 John 2:5-6 says “But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.”**

It’s tempting to think about discipleship in terms of programs or events ... we might think the church’s job is to “do discipleship and evangelism.” And while structure is important and helpful, the very first *disciples of Jesus* were not part of a program or event. They were simply in proximity and *in relationship to a person* ... to Jesus. Discipleship is about our relationship to Jesus and how that relationship begins to *change* us and *form* us into certain types of people... it’s why many like to use the phrase “spiritual *formation*” when having this conversation.

And this process of being *formed* and *changed* to be people who are more like Jesus ... who *become* like Jesus ... has at least these three components. We become like Jesus by:

- **Being With Jesus** Before giving his disciples any tasks or assignments to do ... he just asked them to *follow* him ... to BE with him ... they walked, talked, and shared meals together. An important part of the disciples' formation was just *being with* Jesus.
- **Learning From Jesus** The sheer amount of time the disciples would have spent with Jesus meant they were learning from him all the time ... We can learn a lot by observing. But in addition to their *observation* of Jesus' life ... Jesus very intentionally taught them and instructed them on life in the Kingdom of God. They listened to and *learned* from Jesus' words.
- **Doing What Jesus Did.** Jesus knew that the disciples' personal growth needed to move beyond themselves ... and so when they were ready, he very intentionally empowered them to minister to others, to pray for the sick, to care for those in need ... A disciple of Jesus *does* the very things Jesus did.

So if we think about discipleship in terms of becoming like Jesus ... when we ask questions about "Discipleship in the Digital Age" ... what we're really asking is "How do I become like Jesus in the technological/digital world in which we live? How does digital technology – and especially the values it's created in culture – play a role in me becoming like Jesus?"

### Layne

Romans 12 verses 1 & 2 don't use the word *discipleship*, but the Apostle Paul does explain what living as a follower of Jesus entails. He writes, "*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" Romans 12:1 & 2

Paul's challenge, "*Don't conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" is a powerful statement about discipleship. The Living Bible paraphrases it, "*Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold.*" Paul is pointing out that the values of the culture in which we live and the values of Jesus' kingdom are very different, and as Jesus' followers we need to be intentional about being shaped by his kingdom rather than the culture. Evan and I want to highlight 3 prevalent cultural values in the digital age that are diametrically opposed to kingdom values.

First, while our culture tells us, "*Expect immediate results,*" the kingdom's value system tells us that *lasting results take time to develop.* The digital age in which we live has programmed us to believe that everything should happen quickly. Just think about the time differences between the microwave and the conventional oven, between email and snail mail, between driving to a theater to watch a movie and streaming movies on your T.V. Our culture has conditioned us to expect immediate results...and that includes discipleship and our character development. Chris Nye puts it this way: "*We cannot abandon the soil for the microwave...Jesus had remarkable patience and pace, which would frustrate the Silicon Valley.*" (Kim, p. 10)

We're conditioned to expect everything to be quick, but developing as disciples of Jesus is a life-long process. In the book of the Bible called James, James Jesus' brother writes to 1st Century followers of Jesus who were experiencing suffering for their faith and they were wondering when Jesus would return. James writes these words that are the starting point for Chris Nye's contrast between the microwave and the soil. James writes, "*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*" James 5:7 & 8 Our discipleship and growth as followers of Jesus is an ongoing life-long process, not a quick warm up in a microwave.

## Evan

Second, the digital age has created a world that tells us "pleasure, comfort, and ease is king ... do what is easiest and feels the best ..." In Analog Church, Jay Kim says the same in as many words: "The Digital age is about getting what we want, when we want, how we want, and as much (or as little) as we want." None of us would have to look too far to see this reality at play in our everyday lives ... if I want dinner, I don't even have to step foot in a store to get it. I can pull out my phone, tell them when I want it ready and they'll bring it out to my car when I get there. Not only that, but I can tell them if I want tomatoes or no tomatoes, choose from 3 different cheese types, specify whether I want butter on my bun or not ... I name it, I got it.

Now, lest some of you be tempted to think ... "Ah yeah these spoiled rotten kids today just do whatever they want!" ... I'd like to suggest that this phenomenon of prioritizing comfort and ease is not new or trendy. While the digital age has amplified this tendency, it's a tale as old as humans ... our failure in the Garden of Eden was the same story ... doing what felt best and most comfortable and easiest... and we've been doing the same ever since.

But against this backdrop, we see **in the Kingdom of God this value: growth, character, maturity, and Christlikeness – not pleasure and comfort – are the highest goals.** And to put an even finer point on it ... growth in Christlikeness sometimes *only comes through discomfort and struggle*. When culture tells us to avoid hardship at all costs, the Kingdom asks, "How might that hardship be forming you?" Romans 5:3-5 (NLT) says, "**We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.**"

When Jesus plainly told his disciples that he was going to be arrested and killed ... the disciple Peter dug his heels in and said, 'No, this can't be, that will never happen to you!' We can almost hear Peter saying, "But that's not the way *I* want it to happen ... that's not what *feels* best!" And it's in response to Peter's shortsightedness that Jesus says, "**If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.**"

And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? (Matthew 16:24-26 NLT)

If discipleship is about becoming like Jesus ... then it *must* include becoming like Jesus in his self-denial. Living as a disciple of Jesus means that we daily make decisions that might not be the easiest or most comfortable or most enjoyable ... but are ones that lead us to the abundant, eternal life that Jesus offers us ... and not just the temporarily satisfying high offered by the world.

## Layne

The 3rd contrast we want to explore is the value our world places on absorbing information and giving quick verbal assent to our beliefs over living out our faith in obedience. The digital age prioritizes quick sound bytes over in depth analysis. Compelling headlines, provocative tweets, and statements without context are valued above in-depth reporting, reading an entire article, or taking hours to read a book. In a follow up book author Jay Kim wrote after Analog Church, the author contrasts forgetfulness and faithfulness. We can't help but forget some of the overwhelming amount of information we're bombarded with in the digital age, but Jesus calls us to faithfulness over forgetfulness. Forgetfulness absorbs huge amounts of information and knowledge, but doesn't necessarily apply it to our lives. Faithfulness puts the faith we have in God into practice in our daily lives. We sometimes differentiate between faith and faithfulness, but the Scriptures view them as the same. Faith is much more than the verbal assent we give by saying we place our faith in Jesus. Faithfulness shows itself in the moments and hours of our daily life. Faithfulness is the living out of our faith.

Kim contrasts what we often take for faith with the reality of faithfulness by telling the story of the great tight rope walker Charles Blondin who walked a tightrope across the Niagara Falls dozens of times. On one occasion, after traversing the falls, Blondin asked his audience how many of them believed he could successfully carry someone across the rope on his back. Many in the audience raised their hands. Then Blondin asked for a volunteer and no hands went up. Believing Blondin could do it led many to raise their hands, but that belief didn't translate to their willingness to allow him to carry them across the Falls on a tightrope.

James makes a similar point in James chapter 2 when he distinguishes between faith and deeds. *“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”* James 2:14-19

In a day and age where accumulating information and giving verbal assent to our beliefs is valued over action, followers of Jesus are called to live out what we believe—to validate our faith through our deeds.

## Evan – Action Steps

It's fitting that the third contrast Layne highlighted centered around the action required of our faith, because as we wrap up our thoughts this morning ... I want to talk quickly about some practical *action steps* that we might take to resist the ways the digital age influences and shapes us.

Dallas Willard is famous for saying “we will not *drift* into discipleship.” In other words, we will not *accidentally* become mature, faithful disciples of Jesus. We don't have to look far to see that the current of culture doesn't necessarily carry us *towards* Christlikeness. If we are not purposeful in what we do with our time, energy, and thought life ... we will be shaped and formed by anything and everything *other* than Jesus.

I mentioned at the start of the sermon that discipleship is not a program or event ... it is about relationship ... that doesn't mean that some *intention* and *structure* isn't necessary to nurturing that relationship. Paul says this to Timothy: “...train yourself to be godly. “Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.” (1 Timothy 4:7-8 NLT)

Evidently, we can actually *train ourselves* in this pursuit of becoming like Jesus. So what does some of that training look like? Well, it's what Christians have historically called spiritual “disciplines,” “rhythms,” or “practices” ... they are nothing magical ... just ordinary exercises that help us create an environment where God can change and form us into people who live like Jesus. I'll very briefly share three that correspond to each of the value contrasts we mentioned:

- 1) To resist the “microwave mentality” of today that says, “everything should come quickly without much waiting...” ... we can practice silence and solitude. As we set aside time to be alone, to be still, to be quiet ... we purposefully avoid doing, accomplishing, and achieving ... and instead just wait. Maybe to hear from God, maybe for nothing at all to happen. But in that waiting we learn that ... waiting is okay.
- 2) To resist our culture's obsession with pleasure and comfort ... we can practice fasting. From food, from technology, from other pleasures that numb us. In fasting, we purposefully *don't* give ourselves what we want to teach ourselves that life is about more than feeling as good and as comfortable as possible at every moment. In the discomfort and frustration that comes with fasting, we invite God to show us what we need to learn about our hidden impulses and ‘addictions.’

- 3) To resist the temptation to prioritize information over obedience ... we can start serving others. When we put it in our calendars to give up our time and energy in service to others, we are training ourselves to put what we believe into action.

(Talk to a pastor if you'd like to explore some of these practices more?)

**Layne** –On page 116 of Analog Christian Kim writes, “*What a watching world needs from Christians isn't extraordinary flash; what it needs is ordinary faithfulness.*” It can be tempting for us followers of Jesus to promote ourselves and our faith—to grandstand—but the church's most effective witness since the time of Jesus has been consistently living out our faith in the routine moments and days of life. Hospitality, kindness, and grace, in the face of the world's meanness and exclusivity have made us attractive to those who don't know Jesus. Seeking unity in the face of division and being transformed by Jesus, rather than by the culture around us, have pointed to the love and grace and forgiveness of our God. May our lives be winsome to those who observe us, as we embody the hospitality, grace, unity, love and forgiveness of our Savior.