

PLEASANT SPRINGS CHURCH • DISCIPLESHIP SCHOOL

Spiritual Formation: The Steps of a Disciple

Making Christians vs. Making Disciples — framed by Dallas Willard



The Steps of a Disciple

A Discipleship-School study in spiritual formation, framed by Dallas Willard

Jesus did not commission the church to make *converts*; he commissioned it to **make disciples** (Matthew 28:19). Yet much of modern Christianity has learned to produce people whose sins are forgiven and whose place in heaven is secured — while quietly omitting the apprenticeship to Jesus that he actually commanded. Dallas Willard called this “the Great Omission.” This lesson lays out the difference between the two, and then walks the concrete steps by which an ordinary believer is formed into a disciple whose character increasingly resembles Christ’s.

THE BIG IDEA

A disciple is not a deluxe model of Christian — it is simply what a follower of Jesus *is*: an apprentice, learning from him how to live my own life as he would live it if he were I. Spiritual formation is the process that happens inside that apprenticeship, as grace — met by our intelligent effort — transforms every part of the person.

1. THE PROBLEM — WE HAVE MADE CHRISTIANS, NOT DISCIPLES

Willard’s life’s work begins with an uncomfortable observation: the church has learned to make *converts* — people who have had their sins forgiven and heaven secured — while almost entirely omitting the thing

Jesus commanded, to **make disciples**. He called it “the Great Omission” from the Great Commission.

The cause is a shrunken gospel. For most of Western Christianity, Willard says, salvation has been redefined as “strictly a matter of having one’s sins forgiven and of having heaven nailed down” — what he elsewhere calls the *gospel of sin management*. When the good news is only that sins are forgiven, there is a fatal gap:

“There’s no way to move from being saved in this sense to discipleship, and then from there to spiritual formation.”

Dallas Willard, *Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation*

Forgiveness becomes the whole transaction, and obedience is left “hanging in the air” as an optional extra.

Christian and disciple are not two tiers of seriousness. In the New Testament, *disciple* (learner, apprentice) is the ordinary word for a follower of Jesus; “Christian” appears only three times. A disciple is simply what a believer is — the distortion is that we made “Christian” a category you can occupy without ever enrolling as a learner of Jesus at all.

Making a convert	Making a disciple
Goal: sins forgiven, heaven secured	Goal: a transformed person living now in the kingdom of God
Jesus as sin-payment	Jesus as Teacher, Lord, and Master of reality
Grace = a pass on judgment	Grace = God acting in my life to do what I cannot
A transaction, then business as usual	An apprenticeship that reorders all of life
Obedience optional, “hanging in the air”	Obedience is the whole point — and becomes natural
Measures attendance and decisions	Measures Christlikeness of character

The “Vampire Christian”

Taking just enough of Jesus’ blood to cover the debt — while wanting nothing else of him.

“I’ll take a bit of your blood, Jesus, enough to cover my debts — but I’ll not be staying close to you until I have to.”

This is Willard’s deliberately shocking name for the convert who never becomes a disciple: a faith that banks the benefit of the cross while keeping its distance from the person of Christ — the faith “of a person who simply would use something Jesus did but has no use for him.” He presses it with a question: wouldn’t heaven itself be misery for someone stuck forever in the company of “the magnificent Jesus and the Trinity” they never admired or even liked enough to stay near? A disciple, by contrast, stays close to Jesus because he actually wants to. —

Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation

2. WHAT A DISCIPLE ACTUALLY IS

Get the definition right, because everything else follows from it. **A disciple is an apprentice of Jesus** — someone learning from him how to live my own life as he would live it if he were I. Discipleship, Willard says, “may be loosely described as staying as close to Jesus Christ as possible.” You are not mainly learning *about* him; you are learning *from* him how to run a hard committee meeting, a family dispute, a career, a marriage — “that’s discipleship, that’s what you’re learning as a disciple of Jesus.”

A STATUS YOU ENTER, NOT A LEVEL YOU REACH

“Discipleship is a status that you enter. Transformation is the process you go through in the status of disciple.” You do not become a disciple by finishing — you become a disciple by *starting*. “The thief on the cross became a disciple of Jesus; he just didn’t have very long to work it out.” Early obedience “will be ragged, messy and inadequate — disciples are notoriously green. That’s okay.”

3. THE ENGINE OF CHANGE — VISION, INTENTION, MEANS (VIM)

Willard’s model for how any person changes — and therefore how a disciple is formed — is a chain of three links he abbreviates **VIM: Vision, Intention, Means**. The order matters, because each link depends on the one before it.

"Intention is the key to accomplishment. But vision is the key to intention. If you don't have the appropriate vision, you will not be able to form the intention, and the means which you employ will be employed in a way that does not bring about what you say you want to accomplish."

Dallas Willard, *Realism About Character Transformation*

His diagnosis of where the church usually fails is sharp: **not at the means, but at the intention — because the vision is too small.** "Most of our problems with character formation do not have to do with the means; they have to do with the intention, which is not based on an adequate vision." People rarely meet anyone who has actually *intended* to do the things Jesus said: "You rarely meet anyone who looks at the Sermon on the Mount and says, 'I am going to do that.'" The steps below are simply VIM walked out on the ground.

4. THE STEPS OF A DISCIPLE

1

Receive the Vision: see the Kingdom, and see who God is

VISION — THE 'V' OF VIM

Formation starts with sight, not effort. The disciple comes to see "life now in the kingdom of God... with the whole person now living in interactive presence with God, in all aspects of life. That's the vision." The gospel is this vision: God as absolutely good and competent, reality as the kingdom he runs, and yourself as his beloved and his apprentice.

Willard grounds this in **knowledge, not a leap**: "Faith is not enough; you have to have knowledge as the environment of your faith." A "leap of faith" is really "a leap *without* faith" — and without that basis "you cannot make disciples."

Practice. Saturate yourself in the person of Jesus and the reality of the kingdom — the Gospels especially — until God's goodness and competence become believable to you. Ask: *Would it truly be good to be the kind of person Jesus is? Do I want that?*

2

Form the Intention: decide to be his apprentice

INTENTION — THE 'I' OF VIM

Vision becomes discipleship at the point of decision: "The intention... that is the point at which you become a disciple." Willard ties it to the parables of the **pearl of great price** and the **treasure in the field** — the merchant sells everything to buy the one pearl. "That's a picture of discipleship. You're buying the big pearl."

Count the cost honestly — but count *both* costs. Alongside Bonhoeffer's *cost of discipleship*, Willard says someone needs to write a book on the **cost of non-discipleship**: "the loss is much greater from non-discipleship than the cost is for discipleship." The price of *not* following Jesus — a life that never becomes what it was meant to be — is the higher price.

Practice. Make an actual, nameable decision: *I intend to become a student of Jesus and to do the things he said.* Settle it, so it is no longer in question.

3

Enroll your whole life as the classroom

ENROLLMENT

Apprenticeship is not a religious compartment; it is the reframing of everything you already do. You "have to make a living, deal with people, get an education, enter a career, find someone to be wedded to and raise a family — that's where you want to understand that Jesus is your teacher." The disciple's question is not only *What would Jesus do?* but, one step deeper, *how would Jesus live my life if he were I?*

Remember the scale of the classroom: the church "is not the kingdom of God; it is an outpost of the kingdom." The kingdom — and therefore the training — reaches into your whole ordinary week.

Practice. Pick the ordinary arenas of your week — work, home, conflict, money — and consciously bring each one under Jesus as Teacher.

4

Take up the Means: the spiritual disciplines

MEANS — THE 'M' OF VIM

Now — and only now, resting on vision and intention — come the **means**, which “are what we call spiritual disciplines.” A discipline is simply an activity in my power that trains me for what I cannot yet do by direct effort: “doing something in our own power that enables us to do what we cannot do by direct effort.”

Two crucial reframes: first, disciplines are about **wisdom, not righteousness** — “we’re not talking about what’s righteous, we’re talking about what is wise... you fast because it is wisdom as to how to live with God,” never to earn anything. Second, the mechanism is **grace plus intelligent effort**: you practice solitude, silence, fasting, and service “by the grace of God plus your intelligent effort — and that is what makes it a natural thing... to obey Christ in an easy, routine manner.”

A workable starter set, in Willard’s two families: **disciplines of abstinence** (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, sabbath) to break the grip of the false self; and **disciplines of engagement** (study and memorization of Scripture, worship, prayer, service, fellowship, confession) to fill the space with God’s reality. His tip: to learn to love an enemy, “find ways of serving them — and you will find that you’re able to love them if you do that.”

Practice. Choose one discipline of abstinence and one of engagement for the next month. Practice them as training, not as trying — and not as merit.

5

Let grace transform the *parts* of you

THE WHOLE PERSON

Willard is a realist about *what* changes. Formation is “transformation from a personality that is set away from God to one that is increasingly, in all of its parts, set toward God.” The disciplines work each part of the human being: the **will / heart / spirit** (surrendered to God, the center from which a single, whole life flows); the **mind** (thoughts and feelings, retrained in what they dwell on); the **body** (its automatic habits retrained, so the good becomes reflexive); the **social** dimension (relational patterns healed); and the **soul** (the deep part that integrates all the rest).

His warning: **everyone is already being formed**. “Everyone gets a formation. The problem is the one they got.” The only question is whether it will be deliberate and toward Christ, or accidental and away from him.

Practice. Ask which *part* most needs attention right now — a runaway thought-life, an ungoverned tongue, a body pulled by appetite — and aim a specific discipline at it.

6

Obey where you are — now, however green

OBEDIENCE NOW

Because discipleship is a status and not an achievement, you begin obeying immediately, at your present address. The place the kingdom actually touches your life is “precisely obedience where we are... our obedience to start with will be ragged, messy and inadequate.” To “abide in his word” simply “means to put his words into practice — that’s how we come to know the truth of them.” You do not wait to feel ready; you throw yourself into the deed in confidence, and help comes.

Practice. Name one thing Jesus said that you have been leaving “in the air,” and start doing it this week — imperfectly is fine.

7

Expect the fruit: easy, routine Christlikeness

THE FRUIT

The aim of the whole process is not white-knuckle effort but a transformed character from which obedience flows *naturally*. “When you are different on the inside, it’s easy.” Willard’s example is Jesus on the cross praying *Father, forgive them* — not hard for Jesus, “because he was different on the inside.” The disciple grows toward the place where the commands of God “are not burdensome — that means it’s not hard to do.” And it shows: “you’ll stand out like lights in a darkened world... if you’re a light, you don’t need to make an announcement, you just shine.”

This is a lifelong process, not a finish line — but its direction is unmistakable, and its end is Christlikeness and love.

Practice. Watch for the sign of real formation: something that used to be a battle becomes, quietly, easy. Give thanks — and keep walking.

5. THE CLARIFICATION THAT HOLDS IT ALL TOGETHER — GRACE AND EFFORT

The objection Willard hears constantly is that all this “effort” must be works-righteousness. His answer is the hinge of the whole teaching, and disciples must get it exactly right:

“Grace is not opposed to action; it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude, and God won’t have anything to do with it.”

Dallas Willard, *Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation*

Grace is “God acting in our life to bring about and to enable us to do what we cannot do on our own.” So the disciple is not passive. **The opposite of grace is not effort — the opposite of grace is earning.** The person growing in grace is not the one doing the least, but the one whose life is most invaded by God’s action — and that action is *met*, not merited, by our intelligent effort in the disciplines. This is why the disciplines never become legalism: they are how we “meet the action of God, which is grace.” We work, *because* God is working in us.

THE COMMAND ITSELF — MATTHEW 28:18–20 (GREEK & ESV)

Matthew 28:18–20 — The Great Commission

... πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (ESV)

The one imperative in the sentence is **μαθητεύσατε** (*mathēteusate*) — “make disciples.” “Going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching... to observe all that I have commanded” are the participles that hang on it. The Commission is not “make converts and hope for disciples”; disciple-making, including *teaching them to actually do* what Jesus commanded, is the command. That is the whole reason the Great Omission is worth naming — and the whole point of the steps above.

SUMMARY FOR TEACHING

1. **See the problem.** We have made forgiven Christians and omitted the making of disciples. A gospel that only forgives sins cannot, by itself, produce a transformed life.
2. **Recover the definition.** A disciple is an apprentice of Jesus, learning to live my life as he would live it — a status you *enter*, not a level you reach.
3. **Walk VIM.** A clear **Vision** of life in the kingdom → a settled **Intention** to obey (the point you become a disciple) → the **Means** of the spiritual disciplines.

4. **Aim at the whole person.** Grace, met by the disciplines, transforms the will, mind, body, social life, and soul — until obedience becomes natural and easy.
5. **Keep grace straight.** Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort. We act because God is acting in us.

"The cost of non-discipleship is far greater than the cost of discipleship."

— after Dallas Willard

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Framed by the teaching of Dallas Willard (1935–2013), drawn from his lectures *Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation*, *Realism About Character Transformation*, and the Renovaré Institute series, and his books *The Great Omission*, *The Divine Conspiracy*, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, and *Renovation of the Heart*. Scripture set in the Septuagint (LXX) / Greek and the ESV per the practice of Pleasant Springs Church.

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