

Radical Minimum Standard – Week 2 A Culture of Discipleship

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We are in week two of our series on discipleship called *Radical Minimum Standard*. In this series we are looking at the baseline requirement set for people who believe in Jesus from 1 John 2:6—"Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did." That's a bold and radical statement, isn't it? The Bible says if you claim to be a Christian, it's not enough to believe in your heart that he is the Messiah; it's not enough to think in your head that he is the Son of God. The baseline expectation is a radical change of life! Jesus looked at his early disciples and said, "Come, follow me" (Mark 1:17). It was his invitation to the master class of life, where he invited not only them, but any of us, to come and learn from him, the supreme artist of life, how to live like him. Jesus lived with unbroken intimacy with his Father. He lived a life of selfless love and compassion, of righteousness, wisdom, integrity, and impact, a life of spiritual power and authority, and that's how he wants to teach us to live. Jesus said, "Everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (Luke 6:40). Jesus wants us—Jesus wants you—to become like him, to experience life transformation. Dallas Willard put it this way: "Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if he were you." If Jesus were in your situation and stage of life—if he had your job, your friends, your family, your bank account—if he were put in your exact shoes, how would he live? What would he do? Whatever the answer is, discipleship is the path we take to do what Jesus would do in our shoes, and to do it consistently, joyfully, spontaneously.

We talked about how powerful the world is at forming us into certain kinds of people. Living in this world is like floating in a river: if you don't do anything intentional, you will end up downstream. There are algorithms designed to capture your time and attention with the goal of hijacking your dreams and imagination to turn you into the ultimate consumer: individualistic, discontent, pleasure-seeking. One of the reasons God created the church is to be a counter-current to this world. God puts us in a community of discipleship that is empowered by his Spirit to shape us into different kinds of people, people who are actively learning to look, live, and love more like Jesus.

Discipleship happens best in the context of community. Jesus knew this. When he called his followers into a discipling relationship, he called them into a community. "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them" (Luke 6:12-13). It wasn't just Jesus with Peter, Jesus with John, Jesus with Matthew, Jesus with Thomas. It was Jesus with all these guys together. Here's the takeaway we must hold on to: Jesus trained and transformed his disciples in the context of community. That's what Jesus did 2,000 years ago, and he's still doing that today.

We see the same model from the apostle Paul. He said to the church at Corinth, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). That is how discipleship happens. Someone is chasing hard after Jesus, and they look to others and say, "You can do it! I'm not perfect, but to the extent you see Jesus in me, follow my example and do what I am doing." Like Jesus, Paul knew that this happened best in community, so he said, "Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters" (Philippians 3:17). Paul is telling them, "Do this together, in community! You are not in this alone, you have a team!" In discipleship, in growing in your faith, community makes all the difference.

I've seen this in a practical way. When I was in my twenties, I decided to take up running. I signed up for a 5k and got excited when I ran 3.1 miles for the first time. Then I signed up for a 10k and was pumped when I ran 6.2 miles for the first time. Then I thought, "I'll do a half marathon." I went out to train for thirteen miles, and I just couldn't do it. Something in my mind or body or both shut down after six miles. I would set out to run nine miles but have to stop at six. The next week I'd set out to run eight miles but have to stop at six. I couldn't get past that barrier. One evening I ran with Jason, a friend who was a runner. We put down ten miles, and it seemed effortless. Having someone there running alongside me

enabled me to do something I was not able to accomplish on my own. The same is true in the spiritual life.

When God created us, he designed us to thrive in the context of community. God is relational to his core (for all of eternity, God has existed in community as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and he created us to be relational to our core, too. A few years ago, researcher Daniel Coyle wrote *The Culture Code*. He spent years of his life embedded in the most successful corporations and teams in the world (NAVY Seal Team Six, Pixar, the San Antonio Spurs during their championship dynasty years). He documented everything he could about what makes champions, what systems and cultures produce the best in the world, and he said it all comes down to the community that is present, and specifically, community marked by three qualities:

- A community with **connection**, where there is genuine communication marked by vulnerability and trust.
- A community with **cooperation**, where there is the desire and willingness to work together as a unit and have shared buy-in, commitment, and risk.
- A community that has **clarity**, where everyone knows why they are there and where they are going, and they are all committed to the same goal / purpose.

When you have a community like that, with connection, cooperation and clarity, you can accomplish things you never could have dreamed possible on your own. That's what we want here at The Creek.

Mike Breen wrote a book years ago called *Building a Discipling Culture*. Toward the beginning of the book, he says every church must make a definitive decision about what kind of culture they want to create in their community. He lays out four options as a quadrant [view the online sermon to see the graph]. On the x axis is the level of challenge and on the y axis is the level of support. Depending on the value and priorities of a church, you end up with four drastically different cultures.

- With high support but low challenge, you end up **complacent** with a **cozy culture**.
- With low challenge and low support, you are **bored** and end up with an **apathetic culture**.
- With high challenge but low support, you are constantly **stressed** and end up with a **discouraged culture**.
- But with an atmosphere and a community that is high challenge and high support, you will be **empowered** with a **discipleship culture**.

Looking at the diagram, you know instinctively which is best. You know right away which kind of community, which kind of church, you want to be a part of! This is the atmosphere Jesus set for his disciples, and this is the kind of church Jesus has called us to be!

I met a fellow minister at a conference recently who asked about the discipleship culture at our church. I said we do everything we can to support people, but the challenge is high. We call people to engage in relationships in ways that take a few hours every week. We call people to serve in meaningful ways and use their gifts. We call people specifically to be generous with their finances and invest in kingdom initiatives for the sake of others. We call people to lives of radical personal holiness. He said, "Your church would be so much bigger if you made it easier for everyone to be a part of it." I was taken aback. I was honestly shocked. I thought about it and said, "I mean, you're right. But Jesus didn't commission us to build a large church. He commissioned us to make disciples. If you set out with the goal of growing a church, you will compromise the mission of making disciples. But if you faithfully make disciples, the end result will be a thriving church."

Jesus had crowds around him all the time. He wasn't trying to grow crowds but make disciples. There was a time when there were literally thousands of people following Jesus, so many people that he determined it was time to raise the bar. He told them they were going to have to not only listen to him and enjoy his miracles, but also trust in him, draw their life and strength from him, build their entire lives around him. What happened? "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" (John 6:60). Jesus knew they were grumbling and asked, "Does this offend you? Rather than being upset that I spoke a hard truth, you should thank me for speaking the truth!" But "from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66). Not everyone was ready for the challenge, but some were. "Jesus asked the twelve disciples, 'You do not want to leave too, do you?'" (John 6:67). Peter gave one of the best answers of all time: "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God'" (John 6:68-69). Stay in the game. Let's chase after him together and not give up. I'm in your corner. We can do this together.

I think about the plot line in *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the best-selling books of all time, a story that has captured people for several generations. Keren recently started reading *The Hobbit* with Hudson. The setting for this story is the Shire, an idyllic community that was self-sufficient and self-sustaining, closed off to the troubles and distress of Middle Earth. In the Shire, all the Hobbits live peaceful lives; they enjoy tea and crumpets and second breakfast. It's serene. But Frodo ends up with a ring that sends him on a quest to leave the Shire. He ends up with a community of elves, dwarves, humans, and a wizard, all joining forces on a harrowing journey to the depths of Mordor, to the fires of Mount Doom. They risk everything because of the compelling mission to save Middle Earth. He didn't have to take the mission. He could have chilled out in the Shire, enjoying his friends and his second breakfast, but he signed up for a mission that would demand something exceptional from him, produce something remarkable within him, and change the landscape of the world for generations to come.

What sort of community do you want to be a part of? The tea and crumpet and second breakfast community, or the Fellowship of the Ring? God's vision for the church has always been a compelling culture of discipleship. I want to look at two of the most iconic passages from the book of Acts, the picture of the early church, and imagine the culture they had that changed the world, versus the culture they could have had if they chose the path of consumerism and comfort.

The radical first church in Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

That's the church they had! That's the expression of church that changed the world! But what if instead of embracing a discipleship culture, they chose instead the path of consumerism and comfort. It might read something like this:

The lukewarm first church:

When it was convenient, they would read a chapter or two of the Bible; any more would require too much time. They met with other believers, but only if their kids didn't have soccer games, and of course if the weather was good. (Not so good that they wanted to be outside by themselves, but good enough that there wasn't rain or snow in the forecast. Otherwise, they would, of course, stay home.) When they did meet, they exchanged pleasantries but avoided true accountability and

anything challenging or confrontational. They prayed, but only sparingly, and after all other options had been exhausted. They knew the importance of generosity, but gave meagerly, never to the point of sacrifice. Their homes were sanctuaries for themselves, not for people in need. They lived how everyone else was living. They never saw miracles. Few people were saved.

No one wants to be a part of a church with that kind of description. Yet many people want to be a part of a church where the bar is so low, that is the inevitable outcome. To be honest, that's why a lot of churches are dying. A church like that doesn't make disciples, transform lives, and change the world. We don't want to be a lukewarm church; we want to be a radical church, like the first church. That's one of the reasons we are doing the women's prayer event on Friday, a three-hour period for women to connect with one another, worship God, pray, and seek God's presence. Many of the men in this church are fasting for this event, asking for God to do a beautiful work in these women. We want a powerful culture!

Let me give you another picture of the church found in Acts, the sending church of Acts 13. "Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul" (Acts 13:1). This was one of the largest metro cities in the empire, and this church had an all-pro line up of leaders, teachers, and prophets. This would be like a company having Warren Buffet as their chief financial officer, Elon Musk as their chief engineering officer, Bill Gates as their chief technical officer, Jeff Bezos as their chief business officer—the best and brightest minds, all together on the same team. That's what they had in that church, which must have been pretty fun.

"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2). When that church broke up their powerhouse for the sake of the gospel, guess what happened? Saul, who would later take the name Paul, ended up taking the gospel to all these places: Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, Paphos, Perga, Pamphylia, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Debe, Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, Troas, Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus, Jerusalem, Malta, and Rome.

Imagine what could have happened if the church in Antioch didn't have a discipleship culture. Imagine if, when God said, "I am calling you out on a mission to go and make more disciples," they said, "Ah, we hear what you are saying, but we really like what we've got going on here in Antioch. This is such a great community. Our families live here, we've got life-long friends here, we enjoy it so much. Respectfully, God, we are really comfortable where we are, and we'd like to stay here." Can you imagine? Hundreds of thousands of people would have never heard about Jesus. Entire cities and regions would have been deprived of God's Word. It would have taken another decade for the gospel to reach Europe. We would be missing out today on at least thirteen books of the Bible. It would have been tragic.

That's where we would have been if that church didn't have a discipleship culture, if they weren't willing to leave their comfort zone, break out of their close-knit friend circle, and help others come to know Jesus. We must keep this warning in mind. I was talking to the leader of a church recently who told me about their strategy to get their entire church into discipleship groups. He said they found 150 of their top leaders, people who were really engaged and mature in their faith, and put them into a dozen or so different groups. This was intended to be an incubator experience, to expose them to a discipleship group for a few months so that they could go and lead groups for the entire congregation. In some ways, it was a massive success because those 150 people loved their groups and established incredible friendships and camaraderie. In other respects, it was a failure, because most of those 150 people loved their group so much that they decided to stay together and not lead new groups. They enjoyed being with like-minded, spiritually mature friends so much that they never engaged in the mission, they just enjoyed the Shire

together! We can't afford to have that atmosphere at The Creek. We must build a discipleship culture together and chase hard after Jesus alongside one another.

Years ago, I heard this fable about spiritual friendship.

There was once a sculptor who worked hard with hammer and chisel on a large block of marble. A little child who was watching him saw nothing more than pieces of stone falling away left and right. He had no idea what was happening. But when the boy returned to the studio a few weeks later, he saw, to his surprise, a powerful lion sitting in the place where the marble had stood. With great excitement, the boy ran to the sculptor and said, "Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?" The sculpture responded, "I saw the lion in my heart. All I had to do was remove everything that prevented his beauty from shining through." Discipleship is the process we undergo as the Master takes his chisel to our lives, removing everything that does not reflect the image of God, until all that remains is a unique and splendorous image of Jesus on display. The delight of being in a community of discipleship is like the unexpected joy of that little child. We get to watch God's artistry unfold as he graciously removes all that is not of himself in each other's lives. We cheer and marvel, we stand amazed and sometimes even weep for joy, as the heart of Jesus becomes visible in one another.

Don't you want to be a part of a church like that? I know I do. It's possible. Let's pursue it together, by God's grace, and for God's glory.