

HOW TO STRIKE IT "RICH"
MAKE DISCIPLES—INTENTIONALLY
Matthew 28:16-20

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It was a clear crisp autumn afternoon. I was on an airplane headed for a preaching mission in Centerville, Kansas. As I got settled into my seat, a big muscular man wedged his way into the seat beside me. The man took a quick glance at a magazine, then turned to me and said, "What do you do?"

For most people that must be a simple question. For me it is a temptation to tease rather than answer. So sometimes I say, "I bury people." This guarantees moments of silence. Sometimes I say, "I stand up and make 20-minute speeches and it takes ten people to carry the money to me."

This man was big. He seemed good natured enough. So at the risk of becoming entangled in a two-hour conversation about the woes of religion, I said simply, "I am the pastor of Trinity Hill United Methodist Church." He got deathly quiet. He turned pale. He looked as if someone had shot him straight out of a cannon. When he regained his composure he said again, "You mean you're a preacher? I have never been in a church in my lifetime except for a wedding and a funeral. There is one question I've always wanted to ask somebody like you. What is it you really do up at the church?"

Had I let Jesus be my guide I would have given the man a better answer than I did. Instead, I mumbled off some litany about preparing sermons, visiting the sick, taking care of business. But that's not what we really do up at the church. What I should have said and what the man deserved to hear is "We are in the business of making disciples. We are in the business of helping people become what God intends them to be. We are in the disciple-making business. Let us never forget to make the main thing the main thing."

We have tried to image this disciple-making business in this church over the last several years by using an analogy of a river, 'The River of Life' we call it. There is water all over the Bible, from the flood to the river that flows by the throne of God. We are in that stream somewhere and God is making and shaping us into what we are called to be.

Disciples. They come in all kinds of stages and forms of life. Some of us are just checking out the scene, looking around, trying to figure out, as that man on the plane, 'what in the world do those people do up at the church.?'

DISCIPLES ARE PEOPLE CHECKING OUT THE SCENE. What will help them most is a genuine friend.

Curiosity killed the cat, but curiosity has caused many persons to turn their lives over to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There is a spiritual vacuum in the soul that

remains when the world has given you more than you can imagine. That curiosity, that vacuum, that yearning for something more is none other than the voice of God.

And it finds expression in multiple ways. A toddler climbs up into his grandfather's arms. They talk about the fun they've had together and how much they enjoy one another. Then the kid says, "Poppy, what is God really like?"

A junior high girl is trying really hard to fit in with a group of girls. You know how it can be with seventh grade girls. People can be cruel. They are not being very receptive as girls can be. They shun her, tease her. One day on the way home from school she asks her mother "Are all people like that? I thought God told us to love one another. How come no girls at the school love me at all?" Checking out the scene, searching around the edges, trying to find out what a disciple might really be.

Sam Shoemaker some years ago jotted down this creed for his life entitled "I Stand by the Door." The first three or four lines of it are:

I stand by the door,
I neither go too far in, or stay too far out,
The door is the most important door in the world.
It is the door through which men walk when they find God.

A disciple is one who searches and checks out the scene. What they need most at that moment of life is not a sermon from a theologian; they need a friend to hold their hand.

DISCIPLESHIP, IT'S STEPPING IN THE WATER. It's becoming a member of the body of Christ. It's belonging. It's making a decision. It's getting your feet wet. It's going with the flow. It's stepping into the flow of God's grace and mercy that flows through the universe itself. It's making a personal decision to step into it; nobody can make you do that but you.

Come on in, the water is fine. The water is really fine. We call it membership around here. Have you noticed how incredibly easy it is for a child to learn to swim? Have you also observed how fearful it is for an adult to learn to swim? Isn't it amazing what you must unlearn as an adult in order to go with the flow of something as natural as stepping into the water?

Now, my friends, it is true in the Christian faith. It is the easiest to become a Christian before you are 20 years of age. In fact, over 75% do make their first profession of faith in Christ as youth. It's just natural then. That's why the youth and children's ministries of this church are so incredibly urgent and important. That's what we do for children and youth. The spiritual formation, the opportunities of retreats, the times of prayer, the times of personal counsel, the times of sorting it out to help persons form a strong relationship with Christ, this has eternal merit. This church does it well but let us never forget it is tremendously important work.

Now let me talk to the rest of us a minute. As one who talks with people of all ages regularly about making a decision for Christ, let me say, it will not get easier with time. There will not be a more convenient season. Today is the day of salvation. You can hesitate making up your mind but you cannot hesitate making up your life, for life gets made up one way or another. Why don't you just come on in, the water's fine?

For the first time since the 1930's, membership in the United Methodist Church in the United States has dipped under 8 million people. It didn't make any news. The world doesn't care about the Methodist Church and the Methodist Church is embarrassed to print its own statistics.

We have approximately 35,000 United Methodist Churches scattered across this country. You can go anywhere and find a Methodist Church. But 49% of these churches received no new members last year and many have been barren for decades. Had this 40-year slide happened in any American business, stockholders would not have slept nor employees taken a break until the problem was fixed.

We welcome you. Membership is free. Whether you are rich or poor, young or old, you are welcome here. Discipleship includes membership. The church is the kind of place that will let you in. I've had religious fraternities who were not interested in my company. I have had a country club or two who thought my membership would put a hush on their party. But whosoever will can belong to Christ and help form His Body on earth. Discipleship, it's stepping in the water.

DISCIPLESHIP IS A MATTER OF DIVING DEEPER. This calls for fellowship.

For 50 years after his conversion, John Wesley traveled about 250,000 miles across the country of England preaching what some have said to be 40,000 sermons. The response was both enthusiastic and threatening. His own denomination barred him from preaching in their churches because of his insistence on field preaching. Wesley once said, "I wonder at those who still talk so loud of the indecency of field preaching. The highest indecency is in St. Paul Church when a considerable part of the congregation are asleep or talking or looking about not minding a word the preacher says."

The greatest threat to the Wesleyan Revival were not Wesley's critics. His real struggle was with the faithful. He had thousands of converts. As Wesley said one time, Methodists not only believe in backsliding—they practice it maybe better than anybody else.

He tried to remedy the situation. He formed societies and class meetings and asked people to be accountable to one another for their souls. He tried to create situations in which somebody would look you in the eye and say not what is the weather today or who won the ballgame, but 'how is it with your soul?' It is one thing to inquire about the weather. It is quite another thing to inquire about the soul. Constant attempts have been made to revive this formula of accountability.

But let me cut through the theory and pose the question. Are you involved in a Sunday School Class, Bible Study Group, Prayer Group, Disciple Bible Study, Companions in Christ or some other ongoing spiritual formation process in your life? If not, when are you going to begin?

DISCIPLESHIP IS A MATTER OF RIDING THE RAPIDS. Here's where the fun begins. It is the stewardship of all of life.

Surrender. What comes to mind when you think of that word? There used to be an ice cream shop in Louisville named "Sweet Surrender." Sandy would go over there and drive about it thinking about the delicacies inside until she had this episode of sweet surrender. Does surrender mean ecstasy? Or is surrender defeat, your body beaten up and head dropped low in shame? Or is surrender resignation? We've done all we can do, we just have to wait and see.

Or is surrender finding a new Lord to whom we pledge loyalty and a new kingdom in which to pledge our allegiance? You have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior—dare you claim him as your Lord?

Stewardship. What comes to mind? The manipulative efforts of the pastor to get selfish people to pay his salary? Money donated to a worthy cause for a common good? Sharing spare change with the poor?

What if stewardship were surrender to Jesus, asking him to be the Lord of all that I have, all that I am, all that I hope to be.

DISCIPLESHIP IS GOING FISHING. This is leadership.

Everything I know about fishing I learned from my father-in-law. He was not the most educated man in the world, but he knew how to catch fish. He didn't have a lot of fancy things in his tackle box, but he had a lot of wisdom in his mind. He couldn't afford a boat, but that never seemed to deter him either. According to Jesse Lewis if you want to catch fish: Go to the right place, Fish the right way, Do it at the right time.

Harry Denman, the legendary director of the Board of Discipleship, used to say to colleagues after meetings, "Let's go fishing." They would have rather played cards or at least read the Bible, but Harry insisted. He'd head down to the hotel bar, where he would scout out the place until he found a customer, a waiter, someone obviously carrying a heavy load. Soon Harry would strike up a conversation with them. Pretty soon they would be promising to pray for one another. Then one day Brother Harry found himself fishing in the pure river of life that comes from the throne of God.

Rejoice! The river is here.