

Whole Life Discipleship

John 15:4-12

Paul Valler illustrates through a story of two consultants how drivenness can lead to conflict, selfishness and anxiety. He shows how the discipline of 'remain in me' and walking closely with Christ enables working life to be lived secure in one's identity, sensitive to the Spirit and aligned with God's kingdom purposes. Paul preached this sermon at the 2019 Faith in Business Leadership Retreat.

Whole life discipleship is really rather simple. Remain in Jesus. Because as Jesus said, anyone who remains in Him is fruitful, in whatever context they find

themselves. Simple, but hugely challenging, because putting it into practice and staying connected to God is opposed by the world around us, and attacked through the

distractions and fears that so often come from inside us. You already know this. What does 'remaining in Jesus' actually mean and look like in everyday life?



Coding and web design



Photo: Onqanet technologies

The alarm went at 6.00 am and it felt like Groundhog Day. The same routine, same challenges, same idiots, and Jack hit the snooze button and turned over. A new month, a new financial year, and he didn't feel like it. Yesterday he felt a hero, he had managed to hit the year's financial target. Today he felt like a zero. Sometimes he thought of chucking it in, but even though Jack felt in a rut, tired and driven, somehow he couldn't let go. When the snooze alarm went for the second time he had to leap out of bed and rush.

Later his mobile rang. It was Jenny, travelling to meet a client. Jenny met Jack through church. She discovered he was self-employed in coding and web design. That was helpful, because after having kids she had returned to her work in IT user training, but technology had moved on and she quickly discovered she needed more technical expertise. Jack had that expertise and they occasionally worked together on an assignment.

Jenny always liked to talk things through, which Jack found a bit of a pain really, but she was good with clients. Her call was about a customer refund, which disappointed Jack, because this was the second time something had gone wrong with that client. The size of the refund would make a big dent in his revenue and he felt very reluctant. "He was hacked off last time," said Jenny, "and this time he says he's lost confidence and just wants out. We've screwed up twice Jack. He's right - we should refund him." Jack put his head back on the chair, shut his eyes and blew out a long, slow breath. "OK", he said eventually with resignation - and a hint of resentment.

To escape his disappointment and anger, he played a game on his phone and then suddenly realised 20 minutes had gone. Annoyed with himself he got another coffee. This was not a good day. He'd just wasted half an hour and lost a week's work. And on top of that, a vague sense of dissatisfaction that had been

bubbling under the surface raised its head. Yes he could fix technical problems, but that was as far as it went. Jack wanted something more satisfying in his work, something more complete. He returned to the drudgery of the computer screen.

Later that day Jenny pulled in to her friend Kate's house for a moan. "Jack is so irritable and focused on the numbers", she complained. "He's great at the computer but with a charisma bypass." "Well maybe you should try working with someone else!" said Kate. "But I can't do the technical stuff, and he's good at that, and anyway these geeks are all alike. I'd just be swapping one nerd for another. Better the nerd you know I suppose."

The following day the alarm went at 6 am as usual, and Jack stared at the ceiling for a moment as he woke up and prayed. He pulled out his Bible app and the reading was from John 15. *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain*

in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Jack thought about that, and realised that he had been trying to do it all himself.

His way of validating himself was through this constant effort to achieve results – no wonder he felt driven so much of the time. But now he remembered he was Father God’s child, his identity and self-worth were secure in Christ. He would start living in that truth. Whether he hit his target numbers again or not wouldn’t make any difference to who he really was.

Meanwhile, in another part of town, Jenny was getting ready for a challenging meeting with a client, and needed Jack to be available to give technical advice. She was following the same Bible reading app, and had been struck by verse 10. *If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

As Jenny reflected on that command to love and the promise of joy, she confessed to God her irritation with Jack. Then she remembered that he preferred texting to talking – the polar

opposite to her. So instead of phoning him, she decided the loving thing to do was simply text him to ask him to be available. Imagine her amazement when immediately after sending the text, he called back and apologised, and explained why he felt different today. “I’ve realised that my own insecurity has made me irritable and I’m sorry. It’s ok if I don’t hit the numbers sometimes,” he said. It was all Jenny could do to resist yelling ‘Hallelujah!’ down the phone. Joy indeed.

‘...choosing to use habits and practices that kept him connected and focused on God’

They had just both experienced the benefit of remaining in Christ. Jack had realised that remaining secure in his identity in Christ and rejecting the false identity offered by performance was key to his wellbeing. Jenny had discovered that bringing her feelings to God first was better than trying to dump it all on friends, and that loving was better than complaining. Remaining attentive to God was the key.

After dealing with the client’s technical queries, Jack decided to sit still for a minute and re-centre himself. He realised he had been hurt by yesterday’s client rejection and refund, and so he chose to forgive and let go of his resentment to God. After sitting quietly for a bit, he said to God ‘What next?’ Glancing at his phone he saw Jenny’s earlier text. So he sent her a thank you text for dealing with the client well. She was over the moon. What had happened to this guy? Today he seemed a different person.

Yesterday, Jack knew he had been a fool to be driven by insecurity, a fool to hang on to resentment and foolish to escape dealing with it by distracting himself with a game on

the phone. His distractions had cut him off from communing and being attentive to the Spirit. Today he felt calmer, freer and more purposeful,

because today he was choosing to use habits and practices that kept him connected and focused on God.

The following Sunday the message was on the Lord’s Prayer and Jack was gripped by the phrase ‘Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven’. He saw more clearly the big picture: that God’s purpose is to help bring his kingdom – his intent for human flourishing – into every context in which we find ourselves. Remaining in Jesus therefore means not just remaining in our identity in Christ, and remaining attentive to the Spirit,

but also remaining in God’s kingdom purpose.

So Jack and Jenny talked about changing what they offered. Instead of focusing purely on technical challenge and economic value, they thought about how to go the extra mile and add something more than what was in the contract. They thought about how they could help clients flourish. This was the satisfaction that Jack had sensed was missing in his work.

At first it was costly to spend more time and energy focusing on a customer than perhaps they needed. But Jack had caught a vision and trusted in God to help him work it out. He stopped thinking of customers with problems as ‘idiots’ and chose to see them as he believed Christ would see them. Jack started to become known as a guy who asked deeper questions and did things differently. Word got around. Demand for his services increased. Some of his customers even asked why he did things the way he did. He became more purposeful, more attentive and more peaceful.

Yes of course he had some bad days when he allowed insecurity, distractions and sheer bloody-mindedness to get the better of him. Those were the days he ended up dissatisfied and less successful. But on the days where he chose faith in Christ, communion with the Spirit and obedience to God’s command to love, he was far more fruitful and fulfilled. So over time Jack grew in maturity and increasingly lived as a fruitful and fulfilled, whole life disciple. He developed a more loving and vibrant relationship with God, with other believers, and with his clients. As Neil Hudson says in his definition of a whole life disciple, he was ‘learning the way of Jesus in this situation at this moment.’

Learning to become a whole life disciple is really about the desire of our hearts and whether we want and choose to give the whole of our life



Photo: <https://tricycle.org>

to Christ. Everything in our old nature rebels against that! Our ego wants its own identity, our heart wants attention, and our will brooks no interference. To continue to seek God sometimes feels like steering a boat against the current – against the resistance of our own flesh, the world, and the devil. But if we sometimes give way to that resistance, a failure is not the end. God knows our failures and has already paid for them on the cross.

The key is whether we want to turn our boat back to point upstream again. If you sense you have, in any way, been swept off course, turn back to remain in Jesus. Turn back from drivenness and remain in your secure identity in Christ. Turn away from distractions to remain in the habits and practices that keep you attentive to the Spirit. And renew your purpose to align and remain within the purpose of God – as Christ would in your situation.

Although every disciple fails to a greater or lesser extent in whole life discipleship, every disciple lives in the unconditional mercy and grace of God. When we are thrown off course by the bumps and diversions of life, the real question is: ‘Does our inner compass swing back to face God and seek to remain in Christ?’ As Psalm 27 says: *My heart says of you “Seek His face.” Your face Lord, I will seek.* That is the hallmark of a whole life disciple. 📺



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In 2011 Paul led LICC’s launch of Executive Toolbox. He also pioneered a seminar on integrating work and life underpinned by his IVP book Get a Life: Winning Choices for Working People. He has led workplace streams at Spring Harvest, New Wine and the Keswick Convention.