

Introduction:

About a year ago, we saw our Savior in **Luke 4:42-44**. The crowds and disciples (cf. **Mark 1:36-37**) wanted to control Jesus's life and ministry. But Jesus wouldn't allow this. Why? He understood His purpose. He wouldn't allow the crowds or the disciples to dictate His life. He would only allow the purpose God had given Him to do that. In like manner, we must pursue our God-given purpose instead of being pushed by popular thinking or pleasure seeking. So, what is the purpose or goal of our discipleship? **Luke 6:40** actually gives the over-arching goal of discipleship. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (ESV). Granted, in context, Jesus was applying that statement to the blind who were following the blind and explaining that if you are following a blind master, you will never be any more than a blind disciple and will fall into the ditch with your teacher (cf. **Luke 6:39**). But Jesus's point is only valid if His supporting statement is true in any context. It is true that disciples of the spiritually blind can never hope to be more than blind themselves, but what happens when your master is Jesus Christ? The goal of discipleship is not faithful "church attendance." The goal of discipleship is not cleaning up a few behaviors. The goal of discipleship is to be fully trained and through that to become like our Master, Jesus Christ. Can I encourage you to put your name in **Luke 6:40**? For instance: "Edwin is not above Jesus, but when Edwin is fully trained he will be like Jesus." Can you do that with your name? That is the goal for you. That is what discipleship is all about for you. And that is what we as a congregation are striving to help you with. We are a group of people dedicated to making disciples who are like Jesus (cf. **Matthew 28:19-20**). As such, we are striving to conform everything we do to follow a process of disciple-making so that each and every one of us will be fully trained and like our Master. Here, at the beginning of 2016, I'd like for each of us to envision the coming year and the steps we need to take to move further along this path of training to be like Jesus. I'd like to remind us what we as a congregation are doing to help in this training process and also get every one of us to think in terms of what next steps we need to take in our training to be more like Jesus.

Discussion:

I. The disciples who meet on Livingston Avenue

- A. **The Livingston Circle of Discipleship:** Because the disciples who meet on Livingston Avenue take the disciple-making imperative of **Matthew 28:19-20** seriously, we have examined the Scripture to determine the over-arching characteristics of a disciple. With that in mind, we have constructed the *Livingston Circle of Discipleship*. Please understand what this circle is. It is not merely a handful of things some members of this congregation do sometimes. It is what our shepherds expect all of us to follow. We are growing to be like our Master and these are the characteristics we need to grow in.
1. *A disciple honors God:* According to **John 15:8**, a disciple is one who bears God-glorifying fruit. We know God is seeking true worshippers according to **John 4:23-24**. We even see Jesus in **John 12:27-28** refusing to turn away from His trek to the cross because His goal was to glorify and honor God. If we are going to be like our Master, we'll be disciples who honor God.
 2. *A disciple learns from God:* According to **John 6:45**, a disciple is someone who learns from God. After all, at heart a disciple is a learner. In **John 8:28**, we discover Jesus Himself only did what the Father taught Him. If we are going to be like our Master, we'll be disciples who learn from God.
 3. *A disciple loves like God:* According to **John 13:34-35**, a disciple is someone who loves others the way Jesus, God the Son, loves us. In **John 15:9**, Jesus explained that He loves His disciples as the Father loves Him. If we are going to be like our Master, we'll be disciples who love like God.
 4. *A disciple points others to God:* According to **John 20:30-31**, a disciple points others to God. John demonstrated the entire purpose of his gospel was about pointing all of us to God in Jesus Christ. In **John 17:6, 25-26**, Jesus explained that His work was manifesting God to these disciples so they could do the same for others. If we are going to be like our Master, we'll be disciples who point others to God.
 5. *A disciple does all of this while abiding in God's Word:* According to **John 8:31**, a disciple is someone who dwells in and lives by God's Word. Whatever else we do as disciples of Jesus, we allow His Word to be the dominating guide that leads us. In **John 8:55**, Jesus explained that He keeps God's Word. If we are going to be like our Master, we'll be disciples who abide in God's Word.

B. **The Livingston Process of Discipleship:** It is one thing to say this is what a disciple is. It is another to plan how to accomplish these goals. Therefore, our shepherds haven't simply thought about purpose, but also processes. Please understand what these plans are. They aren't programs some of our members are involved in some times. Rather, they are the processes of discipleship growth for this congregation. Our elders would like to ask us not to think of these as programs, but as steps. Steps in our journey with Jesus to become fully-trained disciples who are like Him.

1. *We honor God through our Sunday assemblies:* The point here is, of course, not that the only place you honor God is in our Sunday assemblies. Rather, this is the main process by which we as a congregation develop our ability to honor God. As we experience the worship and edification of the assemblies, each of us is developed to honor God together, in our families, and on our own. In **I Corinthians 14:13-19**, as Paul was giving instruction regarding the use of the miraculous gifts in that day in the church's assembly, we see the importance of honoring God in an edifying way, singing, praying, giving thanks in a way that builds up everyone whether member or "outsider" as the text says.
2. *We learn from God through our weekly Bible classes:* This is the process we as a congregation are using to develop the knowledge of disciples. Please, remember that the goal of discipleship is not to be a faithful "church attender." A disciple is a learner, Jesus was a learner from God. And while I hope you are spending time individually in the Word of God, we must not lose the practice of learning the Scriptures in the context of the congregational community that dominated the first century. They didn't even have individual copies of the Scriptures so almost all learning was done for them in the context of the congregation, which is why Paul told Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture (**I Timothy 4:13**). Let's not allow our greater opportunity to learn individually to diminish our desire to learn with the congregation.
3. *We love like God through our H2H meetings:* Of course, we know you can love other disciples even if you aren't in a H2H meeting together, and I hope you do. However, this is the process by which we as a congregation are striving to develop disciples who love and serve one another. Our H2H meetings exist to develop more meaningful relationships that will prompt deeper connection and service to one another by mutually digging deeper in applying God's Word to our lives. As seen in **Acts 5:42**, the Christians not only met in their assemblies but from house to house. This allowed the spiritual needs of each Christian to be met so fewer and fewer would fall through the cracks.
4. *We point others to God through evangelistic outreach:* While we haven't yet fully developed a particular process to populate this part of our discipleship circle (that is part of our goal in bringing in another full-time worker), we are well aware that one of our great emphases need to be sharing the gospel with others around us. Like our scattered brethren in **Acts 8:4**, we need to be going everywhere preaching the Word. If nothing else, you can invite your friends and family to our assemblies. After all, the first step in our discipleship process is helping people honor God. What better way to get people on that discipleship circle than to invite them to the first step in our process?

II. What is your next step?

- A. We've talked about these circles before. You may be asking why we need to keep bringing them up. Of course, we need the reminder. We don't want this just to be a nice graphic we display on our literature and on our pre-assembly PowerPoint display. We want this to be in our minds, part of the goal of each and every one of us here. We don't just want this hung on the walls, but talked about in the halls. That will only happen if we remind ourselves again and again and again.
- B. But there is an even more important reason to walk through these two circles again.
 1. We are starting a new calendar year. This is the time when most of us are taking stock of our lives, seeing where we've been and considering where we are going. We are making resolutions and striving to make serious positive changes in our lives. We're determining to eat better, exercise more, handle our finances more wisely, pursue career goals, establish new habits, develop new talents.
 2. In the midst of this planning, our shepherds want to invite each of us to remember the circle of discipleship in our planning for the new year. Remember our Master who determined to pursue His purpose and not be pushed off course by all the other things that competed for His attention (cf. **Luke 4:42-44**). As disciples, our purpose is to be fully-trained to become like our Master. Our Master honored God, learned from God, loved like God, and pointed others to God. Where are you in that journey? Where are you in that process? Are you allowing the congregation to help you walk in that journey or are you trying to go it on your own with some parts of this process?
 3. Please, ask yourself this very simple question. What is your next step? Has your discipleship growth stalled out or not gotten past being one of our Sunday assembly only Christians? We are inviting you to

take the next step of your discipleship growth by learning from God in our weekly Bible classes. Since a new trimester began this morning, it is a great time to take that next step. Has your discipleship growth made it into our classes but you haven't pushed past that? Then we want to invite you this year to be part of our H2H circles. We'll have three sessions throughout this coming year. We invite you to take that next step and participate in one of those meetings. We'll have sign-ups for our new session coming up in a few weeks. Have you grown to participate even in H2H but haven't done much to point others to God? We invite you to make that part of your work with the congregation. Sign up to be part of our guest evangelism program working as a host or hostess, a guest center attendant, a letter writer. Or start inviting people to the assemblies. Ask for the opportunity to pray and/or study with people. Do something to point others to God other than just hoping that being a good person is doing the trick. Where are you on the circle? What is your next step?

4. Of course, we can drill down on each part of the circle and realize that you may be participating in each step of the overarching circle of discipleship. But at each level there are steps you can take to allow each trip around the circle to grow you deeper in discipleship. Perhaps you attend the assemblies, but need to take the next step of participating more fully, singing out, praying along, listening intently instead of falling asleep, taking what you learn about honoring God in our assemblies home to your family or individual worship and honor time. Perhaps you attend the classes, but need to take the next step of preparing ahead of time, or take the next step of getting outside your comfort zone and speaking out in the class discussion, or maybe even taking the next step of helping teach a class. Perhaps you have been part of the H2H circles, but you need to take the next step of actually going over the questions ahead of time, or take the next step of being willing to share your spiritual needs to the group, or take the next step of serving your fellow circle members outside of the meetings, or take the next step of hosting or leading a meeting yourself. Perhaps you have been pointing others to God, but you need to take the next step of expanding your abilities. Perhaps you need to take the next step of not simply inviting someone to our assemblies, but inviting them to a personal study, or taking the next step of conducting a personal Bible study yourself.
5. What is your next step? We don't expect you to be a fully-trained-just-like-Jesus disciple by next Sunday or even by the end of this year. However, you need to consider this coming year and ask what your next steps are. Where are you now? Where can you reasonably be by the end of this year? What are the big steps you need to take this year? What are the small steps you need to take this week? How about pulling out your Connection Card and sharing with our shepherds what you see as your next step. Give our shepherds something to pray for you and some help knowing where you may need special guidance and attention. What is your next step?

Conclusion:

I hope these circles are emblazoned upon your brain. But more than that, I hope they can become a guide to help you grow as a disciple. I hope you are thinking of this church and our work not in terms of programs that keep us busy, but rather in terms of steps that help us become fully trained like our Master, Jesus Christ. What is your next step?