**The blessed labour of making disciples**

text Col 1:28c-29

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Scriptures: Colossians 1:24-2:5

**Series: Disciple Making**, Sermon B of a two-part series

**Theme:** The purpose of proclaiming Christ is to grow disciples to be more Christ-like thorough a painful process which is made possible by the power of God

**Proposition:** Making disciples knowing that the work, whilst hard, is a wonderful blessing.

**Introduction**

I used to sit in the church pew looking at preachers/pastors/ ministers in the pulpit who seemed to work for a couple of hours every Sunday. How hard could that be I thought? Two hours per week of ‘labour’? Ok, maybe there might be the odd paper cut as documents are shuffled around the desk, perhaps a sore back from sitting down in a chair for so long. Or even a sore throat from all the talking that ministers seem to do!

What about the life of the Christian? Turning up to worship services, every Sunday. Soft seats (in Christchurch!), pleasant music, even possible to get small ‘power nap’ in during the sermon if the preacher doesn’t spot you! During the week, maybe a Bible study, perhaps helping out in a church ministry on occasion, but apart from that plenty of free time for recreation and leisure.

The Christian life can look at times as though there’ little hard work involved, whether for Ministers, consistory or congregation, but the reality is that if we are to walk worthy of our calling as children of God, then we must willingly labour in the Kingdom of Christ and God (Eph 5:5). **Just as** a physically sedate lifestyle is not good for bodily health, **so likewise**, a spiritually inactive life is not good for the health of our souls. **Just as** our bodies need to be active in order to be physically healthy, **so likewise** our faith needs to be active in order for us to be spiritually healthy.

The Apostle Paul writes: **“***Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified*” (1 Cor 9:25-27)

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, we are not called to compete in a sports contest, but we are all called to be engaged in a strenuous activity, a blessed labour, that of making disciples. It’s one of the works of service for which those who have been saved by grace alone in Christ alone, through faith alone are to be engaged. Let’s look at this in more detail from our text:

1. **The purpose of making-disciples**

American author, salesman, and motivational speaker. Zig Ziglar famously said: “*If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time*”. Having a clear goal/aim/purpose in life is important if we are to be effective in how we live, redeeming the time allotted to us by the Lord. What is the purpose, the end-goal of making disciples?

In our text the Apostle Paul writes: **“***Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom,* ***that*** *we may* ***present*** *everyone mature in Christ*” (Col 1:28). The word translated ‘present’ here literally means to place or set beside or near. The idea is to present someone for service before a person in authority.

When Jesus was being arrested in Gethsemane, one of those with him took a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus said to him "*Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once* ***send me*** *more than twelve legions of angels?*” (Matt 26:52-53). The words ‘send me’ translate our word ‘present’ from the Greek. Jesus had the authority to call upon His heavenly Father to have more than 60,000 angels be presented for service before him. That’s quite a line-up of heavenly troops!

The point was that Jesus could readily protect Himself from his enemies who would deliver him up to death on the cross if He so desired. However, he wanted to do His Father’s will and give Himself up for others, preferring self-sacrifice to self-defence.

The Apostle Paul describes Christ’s great work of service this way: **“***And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him*” (Col 1:21-22). The word ‘present’ in our text is a one-off event (aorist tense) and looks forward in time to the 2nd coming of Christ at the close of this age.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians about this day saying: **“***For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?*” (1 Thess 2:19). Here Paul is not saying that he himself is the reason why the Thessalonian believers will be there on that great day before their Lord and Commander Jesus Christ. No, it is only through the work of Jesus alone that any of us can be presented before our King as holy and blameless, fully acceptable to God, children warmly welcomed into an eternal home with their Heavenly Father.

How do you and I work towards this gospel goal? By proclaiming Christ! How do we do that? By warning and teaching others will all wisdo!

The Greek word translated ‘present’ was also used in the 1st century world as a legal term meaning to bring someone before the magistrate or judge. There’s a day coming when Adam and every single human being descended from him, will be ‘presented’ before Christ. God’s Word describes it this way in Romans 14:10b: “*we will all stand before the judgment seat of God*”. We do not know the names of all those who will one day be ‘*presented holy and blameless and above reproach before Christ*”. There is a list (it’s called ‘the book of life’) which hasn’t been opened yet for us to see! (ref. Rev 20:12). This list will not include **all** the people who have ever lived, only **some**, those God has chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world will dwell in the Paradise to come.

We saw last week that ‘everyone’ means **every type of person**, for those in 1st century Colossae there was an emphasis on both Jews and Gentiles. We know that making disciples is **not** the work of actually saving others – that is exclusively the work of the LORD. Making disciples is being faithful in our calling as disciple-makers knowing that God is pleased to use our ministry as part of the **means** through which He calls sinners like us to repentance and faith in Christ.

There’s even more to disciple-making though than being used of the Lord as His instruments in the conversion of those who were spiritually dead (as if that were not enough blessing!) The Lord also uses us to grow disciples in maturity. All disciple-making looks to the 2nd coming of Christ as being the **end goal** as the Apostle Paul puts it in our text: **“***Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone* ***mature in Christ***” (Col 1:28). The Greek word translated ‘mature’ here is very rich in meaning. It means full-grown, complete, perfect. It means being completely Christ-like in character, attitude and motivation.

I was talking with someone about the Christian life recently and he asked me ‘Do I have to stop being who I am?’ I said, ‘In Christ we remain who we are, but we become more and more like the perfect version of ourselves’. The ultimate goal of disciple-making is to present everyone as their very best, perfect self.

Do you like babies? I do, especially my granddaughter Alexandra, however, whilst babies can be very cute, they are very vulnerable. Unable to feed or defend themselves, requiring constant care. Spiritually immature people are like that. They are overly impacted by what is going on in the world around them and they do not stand strong in the face of it. They are easily led astray by false teaching – everything seems like good doctrine to them. They do not have the strength to serve others – they have enough trouble keeping their own lives on the straight and narrow. Their faith wavers in the face of small challenges. They make stupid, unwise, decisions and are easily tempted. They are not alert to Satan’s traps and devices.

Spiritually immature people need to be discipled so that they grow up in Christ. Babies are wonderful, but we don’t want them to stay as babies do we? Newly converted Christians are wonderful, but we don’t want them to remain immature in the Lord, do we? We do not reach full maturity in Christ in this life, however progress in Christlikeness is the goal of all disciple-making.

One of the signs of spiritual maturity is a willingness to be engage in Christ’s call to ‘make disciples of the nations’. The process is both painful and powerful

Let’s look at the pain now as we move to our 2nd point:

1. **The pain of making disciples**

When an athlete competes in a race, he or she works hard to reach the finish line as quickly as possible. This requires the expenditure of energy and a constant struggle to maintain a fast pace. In our text Paul writes to the Colossian believers about the toil and struggle of his work.

Having presented the **focus** of disciple-making: Christ; Having summarised the **means** of disciple-making: Proclaiming Christ; Having identified two **key aspects** of the work of disciple-making: warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom; Having pinpointed the **goal** of disciple-making : presenting everyone mature in Christ, Paul then describes the **process** of reaching the goal: “*For this I toil, struggling*” (Col 1:29a)

The word ‘toil’ describes hard, exhausting, labour. Toil results in physical tiredness. One day our Lord Jesus had been busy ministering to the crowds, when evening had come he got into a boat with his disciples and a great storm arose with waves breaking into the vessel. What was Christ doing whilst the wind blew hard and the waves crashed onto the boat? He was asleep in the stern. He was tired. Very tired. So tired that all the activity around him did not wake him up. Christ is a hard-worker. A toiler.

The word ‘struggling’ conveys a striving against opposing forces. Paul writes to the Colossians (4:12) about Epaphras who was “*always* ***struggling*** *on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God*”. Christ struggled, striving, in the garden of Gethsemane: Gospel writer Luke records for us (22:44) that Jesus, “*being in an agony …prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*”. The word ‘agony’ is the English equivalent of the Greek word in our text ‘struggling’ – agonizomai.

It’s the same word which Paul uses to describe his labour for the believers in Colossae and neighbouring Laodicea: **“***For I want you to know how great a struggle (agony) I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face*” (Col 2:1).

The work of making disciples is exhausting, agonising labour. It was for Christ, it was for Paul, it is for all who actively proclaim Christ with the goal of presenting other disciples mature in Christ. Why is disciple-making such hard work? Here are some possible reasons:

1. **Weakness**. If your muscles are weak, then physical labour is harder. The Apostle Paul knew what it was to be lacking in strength for the work of ministry. Some undisclosed condition weakened him. He calls it a ‘thorn in the flesh’ in 2 Cor 12:7.

As disciple-makers we all have weaknesses.

1. **Resistance**. If you are working against an opposing force, your labour is more taxing. The Apostle Paul knew much opposition to his work of making disciples. e.g. 5x whipped by the Jews with 39 lashes, 3x beaten with rods, once stoned. (2 Cor 11:24-25). Those who are active in disciple-making will meet with resistance from some who are opposed to the person and work of Christ. **“***Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Tim 3:12)
2. **Duration**. If you are working for a long period of time, then fatigue can result in exhaustion. Paul speaks of the ongoing hardship of many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. He also notes ‘the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches’. Elders particularly experience the relentless burden of care for the church over the duration of their term of office, and often beyond. Disciple-making is not ordinarily a quick process, but a slow, consistent, persevering work undertaken with much patience. Paul spent 3 years admonishing the Ephesians as he made disciples of Christ there (Acts 20:31).
3. **Messiness**. When my tools are not tidy, and my shed is disorganised, any task I do there is likely to be harder and take longer. Making disciples often involves getting involved in the messiness of the lives of those to whom we are proclaiming Christ. In his book entitled ‘Cross Talk: Where Life and Scripture Meet’ author Michael Emlet helpfully writes of approaching people as “saints, sufferers, and sinners.” You may be discipling someone who is in Christ (a saint) or who does not know the Lord (not a saint). However, suffering and sin are common to all people. Both these aspects of our lives in a fallen world lead to messiness/difficulty in life. Graciously working through this with another person takes time and is often tiring, especially when our own messiness (sin and suffering) is added into this disciple-making work environment.
4. **Setbacks/disappointments**. Some people undertake projects which they never finish. The work may stop due to setbacks- as the rebuild of the Jerusalem Temple did in Ezra’s time. Disappointments and discouragements sap our will to keep working, draining energy and leading to increased fatigue. The work of making disciples is often attended by setbacks and disappointments. A planned meeting may be repeatedly cancelled. The person being discipled may find a particular Biblical truth hard to accept/apply to their lives.

These are just some possible aspects of the toil and struggle of making disciples:

a) Your own weakness

b) Resistance to the work

c) Long duration of the labour

d) Messiness both in the life of the one being discipled and in your own life

e) Setbacks and disappointments along the way

If it’s that hard to make disciples, why even bother trying? One answer is because God empowers us to labour and to strive, thereby enabling disciple-making not only to be possible but to be wonderfully rewarding work, but also, more importantly, giving glory to God. This brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **The power of making disciples**

Most of us know what it’s like to have a splinter under the skin. Painful, irritating, distracting and sapping of energy and concentration. My eldest son once had a 3cm boxthorn buried in his leg which my wife removed with a pair of pliers. Ouch. It was difficult for the Apostle Paul to labour with the ‘thorn in his flesh’ – which he describes as a ‘messenger from Satan to harass me’. We don’t know what exactly this image refers to – something troublesome, ongoing, debilitating and sapping of strength.

You’d expect Paul to complain that this limited his vitality and slowed down his work as a disciple-maker. Actually, the opposite was true. Paul explains this in 2 Corinthians 12:9, when he recounts God’s words to him “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*." Paul experienced the energy and power of God at work within him. His own weakness in toiling and struggling to serve the Lord resulted in God being glorified, not Paul being puffed up with pride – becoming conceited (2 Cor 12:7)

He says in our text: (Col 1:29) “*For this (the ministry of proclaiming Christ in order to present everyone mature in Him) I toil, struggling with* ***all his energy that he powerfully works within me***” This is a very energised set of words in the Greek, let me explain. The words ‘energy’ and ‘works’, one being a noun, the other a verb, both come from the same Greek word root: energia –from which we get our English word ‘energy’. Paul uses the Jewish (Semitic) language technique of doubling for emphasis literally ‘*all his energy that energises within me’*

He’s like a human version of the ‘Energizer Bunny’ – the marketing icon and mascot of Energizer batteries or the very similar ‘Duracell Bunny’. These bunnies are both pink toy rabbits with lots of energy. You could say that Paul was an ‘Apostle on steroids’ - full of God-given ‘get up and go’. The last Greek word in this text is dunamis –from which we derive our English term ‘dynamite’. This servant of God has explosive power. So, putting this all together, Paul is staying that his work of proclaiming Christ is empowered by God’s energy which energises within him with great power**.**

Now that’s hugely encouraging for disciple makers facing the toil and struggle of their own weaknesses, opposition and resistance for the long-haul through the messiness of life beset by discouragements and disappointments along the way!

How then, you may ask, do disciple-makers actually experience God’s power at work within them? Here are 3 answers to that question:

a) **By working themselves.** My wife has an electric bike which she uses to travel across town for her studies during the week. It is a ‘pedal-assisted’ model. This means that when she turns the crank, the electric motor adds a certain % of additional power to make her go faster than she otherwise would. I once got her ride up to 43km/hr in ‘high’ mode☺

Now I can’t give you a scientific explanation of **how** God’s energy works powerfully within his faithful servants, but I do know that He does this **as** we labour in the works which He has prepared beforehand for us to do. To put it in electric bike terms, we need to be pedalling to experience His energizing power kicking in.

b) **In the midst of struggle**. When Jenny is tired at the end of the day and is riding back, perhaps into a stiff northerly, she turns the power-assist mode on her bike from ‘eco’ to ‘normal’, or even to ‘high’. Each step adds more power assist to her peddling.

Imagine an electric bike which could detect the resistance moving forward and only activated the power assist when there was a headwind or an uphill gradient.

Similarly, it is often when we are toiling and striving most that we often experience more vividly the grace of God’s enabling power working through us. As Paul says, ‘when I am weak, then I am strong’. (2 Cor 2:10b)

c) **Through the encouragement of others.** This is going to be a stretch for my electric bike analogy! Imagine that the machine could sense the presence of others riding the same course and could draw some extra power from them.

Here’s the point - God’s power works in us not only individually, but also collectively. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes (12:6) “*Greet Mary who has worked hard for you*”. (16:12) “*Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord*”. When we see the power of God at work in the lives of fellow gospel workers we are energised. The whole Christian life, lived in dependence upon the enabling grace of God, is fuelled by divine power. This is how Paul describes the mystery of his labour in and through us: “*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:12b-13).

We experience God’s powerful work in us AS we ourselves labour, often in the midst of struggle and resistance, further enhanced as we work together as part of a team of gospel workers toiling alongside one another.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are ‘jars of clay’, ordinary, weak, fragile, breakable, but we have within us the treasure of the gospel (2 Cor 4:7), the ‘*unsearchable riches of Christ*’ (Eph 3:8). This treasure is to be poured out of us, liberally distributed around us, this is God’s will for all who know the Lord

Whilst the Colossian church faced challenges, they were a healthy congregation, always in need of further growth in Christlikeness as they worked out their own salvation in fear and trembling. By God’s grace, you are like them. The Apostle Paul was thankful to God for the faith which was so evident in the church at Colossae and for the love that the saints had for one another (Col 1:4). He rejoiced to see the good order and the firmness of the faith of the congregation at Colossae.

I have likewise rejoiced to see the good order and the firmness of faith here in the FRC Launceston. It has been a joy to be in your midst for the past 10 days.

Here is a good ‘filter’ to put all of our service to the Lord through: “*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me*” (Col 1:28-29)

Ask yourselves these questions as you continue to serve Christ in the different ministries in which you are involved within the covenant community here and in your witness for Christ outside the church:

1. Am I proclaiming Christ as I serve, in both word and deed?
2. Does my instruction, as I serve, include both warning and teaching?
3. Is my goal to see the person I am discipling be converted and/or grow in spiritual maturity?
4. Do I accept that this work will be a hard and painful struggle at times?
5. Do I experience the power and energy of God at work in me?

O church of the Lord Jesus Christ, let’s move forward in the power of the Lord as we go, making disciples of the nations,baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded us. And behold, He is with us always, to the end of the age.

AMEN.