

LEARNING JESUS

DISCIPLES MAKING DISCIPLES 3



Keep your eye on the goal and strive to increase in Jesus.

T. M. MOORE

A ReVision Study from

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Learning Jesus

Learning Jesus
Disciples Making Disciples Part 3
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Learning Jesus

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Welcome to *Learning Jesus*

Disciples are learners. All disciples have a twofold responsibility to grow as disciples and to help other disciples grow as well.

And what we're trying to grow into is Jesus. We want to become more like Jesus.

But learning can be difficult. It's easy to lose your way, to settle for too little, or to fail in realizing more of Jesus.

In this part of our study, "Disciples Making Disciples," we'll see why learning Jesus is the proper goal of our discipleship. And we'll pick up some suggestions about how to persevere in this "burdensome task" so that growing in Jesus becomes a daily reality.

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May the Lord bless you as you take up this study, *Disciples Making Disciples*, that you might grow in Him and His calling every day of your life.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 This Burdensome Task

I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. Ecclesiastes 1.12, 13

The call to learning

Those who follow Jesus are on an upward path of becoming more like Him. They focus on Him, learn about Him, take up His agenda as their own, and make the most of every opportunity to teach Jesus to others.

Every true follower of Jesus Christ is a *disciple* of Jesus. And every *disciple* of Jesus is also called to *make disciples* by teaching and nurturing others in Him. The New Testament Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, derives from the verb, *manthano*, which means “to learn.” The basic meaning of the word *disciple* is *learner*. A disciple is one who learns, and for our purposes, one who learns Jesus and follows in the way of life He lived and taught, including the duty of teaching Jesus to others (cf. Matt. 11.29; Eph. 4.17-24; Col. 3.16).

Being a disciple, one who teaches others, doesn’t just happen. Such a way of life is the fruit of *learning*. Learning does not come easy to most of us. Think of all those years we spent in school, daydreaming about when the days of books, lectures, and tests would finally be over, and we could get on with what we really wanted to do in life.

At the same time, human beings are natural learners, but only within certain rather narrow parameters. When it comes to learning things *beyond* what we naturally enjoy or need to get by, most of us look at learning as a chore, a kind of necessary evil, a “burdensome task.” The great Irish leader Columbanus put it this way: “For indeed what is learnt here without sorrow and toil, in the time of our very greatest stupidity and weakness? But if temporal sorts of training [Latin: discipline] destroy the sweetness of present joy, what is to be hoped for from this training of our school? This is in fact the training of all trainings, and at the price of present sorrow it prepares the pleasure of unending time and the delight of unending joy” (*Sermon IV On Discipline*).

A “burdensome task”: That’s the way Solomon described the call to a life of learning. The Hebrew is even more severe – “an evil matter” with which God has “afflicted” (*exercised*) the children of men. And yet it pleases God to *afflict* human beings with the responsibility of *learning*. Doesn’t God usually bless us with good things? Why should He afflict us with this unhappy, brain-wracking, sorrowful business of learning?

The way to wisdom

Because learning, the life of being a *disciple*, is the way to wisdom; and wisdom is the lifestyle that expresses the pleasure and purpose of God, especially as that is revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus Christ, in Whom is the treasury of all God’s wisdom (cf. Col. 2.3). God calls us to be wise, and wisdom comes, first, from fearing God Who calls us to be wise (Ps. 111.10), and then from searching diligently for wisdom through the hard, *burdensome* task of learning.

But why should learning be such a burdensome task? Primarily because we must work hard at it if we’re going to get anything out of it. In a fallen world, we no longer enjoy the ability, like Adam naming the animals, to learn, as it were, by mere observation and intuition. We must search and investigate, ask questions and read, try various approaches and correct our mistakes, take good notes and change our behavior, discuss with others, and a whole host of other activities.

True learning requires, above all, a commitment of the heart, so that we *desire* to be wise and are *eager* to pursue a course of learning as much as possible, so that we can demonstrate the wisdom of God increasingly in every area of our lives, and teach His wisdom to others as well.

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The hard work of learning

Our course of study anchored in the Word of God, the world becomes our classroom, its mysteries and creatures are our curriculum, and our fellow learners past and present are our teachers. Learning is hard work, but it can result in wisdom, and wisdom honors God and brings benefit to the people in our lives.

Jeremiah expressed the joy that comes from committing oneself to a life of learning, when he described the Scriptures as “the joy and rejoicing of my heart” (Jer. 15.16). Why was this so? Because God had called Jeremiah and made Him a disciple and prophet. Nothing would discourage or dissuade him from this path, and learning from the Word and world of God would be, in the midst of all his trials, his great joy and delight.

We may not be good learners; we may not even like studying or having to learn new things. But it pleases God to have “afflicted” us with this “burdensome task” of seeking out, searching through, investigating, and learning as much as we can, throughout the whole course of our lives. This is how we grow in the Lord, become wise, and are better able to teach others so that they might grow in wisdom, too.

Well, why can’t we just pray for wisdom, like Solomon did, and wait for God to bestow it, if it pleases Him to do so (cf. 2 Chron. 1.10-12)?

Because, while Solomon *prayed* to God for wisdom, and God promised to grant it, Solomon still had to *apply himself diligently* to acquiring wisdom, which he did through learning. This process of gaining the promised wisdom of God is what Solomon alluded to in our text. He shows us that the way to wisdom follows a path of study and learning, where there are no shortcuts.

Learning and discipleship may be a burdensome task, but it’s what God has called us to as disciples of His Son.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that many people find learning a “burdensome task”? Why is this?
2. Describe the relationship between prayer and hard work in learning to become wise.
3. What is wisdom, and how does wisdom relate to following Jesus?

Next steps - Conversation: How would you describe your life as a “learner of Jesus” at this time? Are you as diligent in this as you ought to be? Can you identify any areas where you might like to improve? Talk with a fellow believer about these questions.

2 Losing Your Learning Way

I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. Ecclesiastes 1.12-14

Vanity and wind

“Well,” you say, “a lot of good all that learning seems to have done Solomon!”

It’s true that, after years of observation, study, talking with wise people, writing about his studies, making good use of what he was learning, and much more, Solomon concluded that everything he had learned was “vanity and grasping for the wind.” He was burned out and bummed out on learning and on life.

But Solomon’s problem had nothing to do with learning *per se*. The drudgery and disappointment his life had become was not because of all his learning, but because he learned the wrong things.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians have a twofold calling. We are called to be learners, and we are called to help others become learners by teaching them the things of Christ. Disciples making disciples. It pleases God that we should be wise and reflect the character and will of Jesus Christ in every area of our lives, and that we should teach Him to others. We pray that God will make us wise, but we also need, like Solomon, to take up a course of learning, as hard or burdensome a business as that may seem to some of us.

God will give us wisdom, and fit us to be teachers, but only as we submit to the disciplines of learning with which He is pleased to afflict us.

But if Solomon did that, and it left him with the conclusion that everything is just vanity and wind, why should we take up this burdensome task of searching out and studying and learning?

Solomon’s quest for wisdom was not always vanity and wind. There were many years when, as Solomon increased in wisdom, he became a source of much blessing, both to the people of Israel and the nations all around (cf. 1 Kgs. 3-10). Solomon’s problems with all his learning came because he failed to pursue his course in the way God intended. He turned his zeal for learning into a passion for self-indulgence, as we see in Ecclesiastes 2. In his desire to gratify himself, Solomon *lost sight of God* and, frankly, he found another deity to love and serve even more.

Solomon.

Wrong turns in the path

Solomon made two mistakes that every disciple of Jesus Christ needs to guard against as we pursue the lifelong quest for wisdom.

First, he took his eyes off the Lord as the exclusive end and focus of all his life and learning. He simply lost sight of the upward calling to seek the Lord in and through all his learning. Solomon had been charged with seeking and searching out all things “under the heavens” – that is, understanding life according to the way God designed and intended it to be lived. True learning occurs as we, grounded in Scripture, devote ourselves and our learning to the Lord, that we might know Him and glorify Him in all we do (Col. 3.23).

But Solomon made room in his curriculum for false gods and fleshly diversions (1 Kgs. 11.1ff). The longer he indulged his lusts and imbibed the false worldviews of his many wives and concubines, the more wisdom slipped from his grasp and learning became a chore and a bore.

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At the same time, Solomon neglected to give God the glory for all he had learned and been able to achieve. He became more interested in his own glory and prosperity than the glory of the Lord.

“I” problems

In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon recounts the record of his achievements – the fruit of all his learning – and they are impressive, to say the least. But right away we begin to sense a problem. The most recurrent word in Solomon’s report is some variation of the first-person personal pronoun: “I, me, mine.” Solomon slipped from pleasing God by gaining wisdom to pleasing himself by gaining pleasure, wealth, and fame. His loss of focus on God and his desire for self-aggrandizement left him with a bad taste in his mouth for learning – and for life.

Solomon began worshiping another god – himself and his passions and delights.

Once Solomon lost sight of the upward calling of God, he turned inward to himself, his lusts and pleasure, and doing only what mattered to him. But once he had taken the place of God in his life, the burden of all his works, and all his learning, began to be too much for him. It was not satisfying, it made him suspicious of the people around him, and he found it to be more of a burden than a delight. And when he lost his way in his calling to follow the Lord, he dragged the entire nation of Israel down with him.

The same can happen to us, if we’re not careful, as we take up the pursuit of wisdom through learning, to *keep our focus on following Jesus*, serving others with the things we are learning. If we’re just learning to impress others or gratify personal desires, we’re off course from the burdensome but glorious task of learning to which we are called as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Solomon finally came back to his senses, but it was very late in life (cf. Eccl. 12). Let’s learn from his mistakes and not allow ourselves to be pulled from the true course of discipleship by the transitory temptations of the times. In all our learning, let’s continue to follow Jesus, to grow in Him, put to good use that which we’re learning, and teach others the things of the Lord, for the praise of His glory and grace.

For reflection

1. How did Solomon get off track in his calling? How can we guard ourselves against being thus diverted from following Jesus?
2. How can believers help one another to keep their minds focused on the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus?
3. What might be some cues to suggest that you are starting to stray from your course as a disciple – a *learner* – of our Lord Jesus?

Next steps - Preparation: Do you think you might be a better learner of Jesus if you had a “study partner” to help you along the way? Find someone else to work through the studies in this series with you.

3 Excellence in All Things

And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm. Daniel 1.20

Learning to please the Lord

Daniel and his friends provide an excellent example of learning with a proper focus, and for the purpose of serving God and others. This was a considerable challenge for these young Hebrews.

As Daniel and his friends took up the challenge of King Nebuchadnezzar to study and prepare for service in the royal court, it's clear they were determined not to make the mistake of Solomon.

They would enter the king's curriculum, but only on God's terms, not Nebuchadnezzar's. Daniel persuaded the man in charge of their preparation to allow them to make certain adjustments in the curriculum. They would not compromise their focus on the Lord by indulging in the king's cuisine. They knew what Ezekiel, their contemporary, had taught about the diet they were to follow while in exile (Ezek. 4.9-13), and they determined to stay on the path with the Lord, rather than stray into the swamp of self which had mired Solomon all those years before.

Daniel and his friends were being placed into a new social and cultural arena, removed from their familiar Hebrew surroundings, and inserted into the royal court of Babylon. The change of context meant that Daniel and his friends would have to learn some new things – language, literature, history, culture, protocols of court, and more.

This was no weekend seminar.

But these young men sensed an opportunity to serve the Lord and, though they must have found a good bit of their learning to be a burdensome task, they determined to keep their studies and preparation within the framework of God's overarching will for His people, and they did not hesitate to press ahead.

Further, they may have known of Jeremiah's instruction to settle down, settle in, and seek the *shalom* of their captors (Jer. 29.7ff). We know that Daniel possessed a scroll of the book of Jeremiah later in life (cf. Dan. 9.1, 2). Is it possible he had heard his preaching, or seen his book even at this early age? For Daniel must have sensed in the king's offer an opportunity not only to serve the royal court of Babylon, but to bring the *shalom* of God to His enemies, with who knows what kind of consequences.

Thus anchored in the Word of God, Daniel and his friends were ready for whatever learning the Lord required of them to fulfill the mission to which He was sending them. This is what all disciples of Christ are called to do.

Ten times better

Thus Daniel and his friends accepted the king's challenge and devoted themselves to learning everything they could about their new context and calling, at all times throughout the course of their studies, keeping their eyes on the Lord. At the end of the course, they proved to outshine all the other students, and all the other graduates of the king's program from previous classes. Daniel and his friends were "ten times better" than everyone else in the capital, even those who had been serving the king for many years.

We know how the story of Daniel works out. He continued to be advanced because of the skill and wisdom he demonstrated at each level of service. At the same time, Daniel did not hesitate to bear witness to his God and to explain that the things he knew and did and taught were because of his devotion to the God of heaven and earth.

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Daniel provides an excellent example of how we can expect devotion to learning, pursued unto the Lord, to cause the Kingdom of God to advance in us and through our efforts.

Excellence in all things

The apostle Paul exhorted the people of Thessalonica to press on for greater excellence as disciples – learners – of Jesus Christ. They were growing as witnesses for the Lord and teaching and encouraging one another during a difficult time of trial. Their faith, learning, and example were known and admired throughout the Christian world of the day (1 Thess. 1.8).

But Paul did not want them to rest on their achievements. He exhorted them to “abound more and more” and to “increase more and more” (1 Thess. 4.1, 10) in such works of love, so that their wisdom and witness would have even more powerful effects.

They had proven to be true disciples of Jesus, devoted to learning Him and making Him known. But they needed to stay the course of such sound learning, and to increase in good works “more and more.” It’s not a stretch to think that Paul might have been thinking of Daniel and his friends as he encouraged these faithful disciples to keep growing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are called to be diligent in seeking wisdom from God through a lifelong course of discipleship and learning. To follow Jesus as disciples, we must be devoted to learning, beginning with the milk and solid food of the Word of God, and from that platform, everything we need to fulfill our individual callings from the Lord. In every subject, for every skill, we must strive for excellence, to be “ten times better” than everyone in our Personal Mission Field – not to vaunt or indulge ourselves, like Solomon, but to serve others and give faithful and consistent witness to our Lord.

This is the standard God holds out for those He uses to advance His Kingdom.

For reflection

1. What is excellence? Why does it make sense for followers of Jesus to pursue excellence in all things?
2. What are some things you might do to increase and abound in excellence in your calling from the Lord?
3. What obstacles can keep you from pursuing excellence?

Next steps – Preparation: What are some areas of your life which, if you could improve by learning, might open doors of opportunity to bear witness to the Lord?

4 Mad for Learning?

Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" Acts 26.24

The mind of Christ

The apostle Paul declared – incredibly! – that all who believe in Jesus and are His disciples have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16).

The mind, with its powers of observation, description, analysis, memory and recall, synthesis, imagination, and problem-solving – as if that weren't amazing and wonderful enough. But we have the mind of Christ!

Now being in possession of the mind of Christ is no mean thing. Jesus, we recall, used His mind to baffle the theologians of the day, gain insight into the thinking of every person, outwit His enemies and outthink His detractors, teach His followers, proclaim His Kingdom, and even to turn water into wine! And we who are learning Jesus have this same mind! Surely it would be a colossal failure of our calling as stewards of God's good gifts *not to grow into* the mind of Christ?

Having the mind of Christ is something to grow into by stages, as we apply ourselves to learning Christ in all the ways available to us. Paul had spent a lifetime learning Christ, but he didn't realize the truth of what he'd been learning until after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. Unlike many of us, I doubt that Paul, a rising star in the Jewish ruling class of the day, ever looked back on all the things he studied during his preparation and wondered, "What was all that about? Why all that philosophy and poetry? Why do I need all that stuff to serve my Hebrew brethren?"

God knew what he was doing in making of the young Saul of Tarsus a man evidently mad for learning. In Paul's ministry and writings, we see the fruit of a life devoted to learning, which he deftly applied to grow in the knowledge of the Lord and to make disciple-making disciples. Saul had always wanted to please God, even when he persecuted the followers of Jesus. All his studies and preparation must have been consciously devoted to preparing him for leadership among the Lord's people. But only after coming to faith in Christ would Paul realize just how valuable all those years of preparation had been.

From that moment on, Paul devoted his mind to learning Jesus, to taking every thought captive to make it obey the purposes of his discipleship (Eph. 4.17-24; 2 Cor. 10.3-5). And he calls us to imitate him, just as he imitated our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11.1).

A whole-life curriculum

As a proud son of the tribe of Benjamin, Saul of Tarsus would have had a chip on his shoulder as a young man. Doubtless his comrades teased and taunted him for having the name of his forebear, King Saul, who brought shame on himself and his nation. Saul of Tarsus would have been determined to vindicate his name and his God by whatever he set out to do in life, including his studies and preparation.

He studied Greek philosophy and literature, because there he could learn the tenets of reason, logic, and argumentation, essential to making one's way up the leadership ladder. He would have learned culture, world religions, and the patterns and ways of the natural world by devoting himself to the literature of the Greeks.

He also learned the laws and protocols of Roman life. As a citizen of Rome, he would have wanted to know his rights so that he could use them to maximize his advantage whenever necessary.

He sat at the feet of one of the great Jewish teachers of his day, from whom he learned the laws and traditions of his people far above any of his contemporaries. His knowledge of the Old Testament was

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prodigious, as even a cursory reading of his epistles makes clear.

And just at the moment all that great learning seemed poised to come into service *against* the cause of Christ, the Lord Jesus intervened to put it all in proper focus and send Paul to Jews and Gentiles alike with the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Now, renewed in Jesus, and focused on the upward calling of discipleship, Paul put his great learning to use for the Kingdom of God, and called all who read him to do the same. Paul continued to observe, read, study, and learn throughout the course of his life, as we see during his stay in Athens, and when he urged Timothy to bring him the books he'd left behind in Ephesus (cf. Acts 17.16-23; 2 Tim. 4.13).

Lifelong learning

Paul was a lifelong learner. He had pursued a whole-life curriculum, and Jesus was determined to use it all for His glory. Paul was not mad *with* much learning, but he was mad *for* it, and he wrote to the churches to take up a devotion to learning not unlike his own (Eph. 4.17-24; 1 Cor. 11.1).

Would we describe ourselves as “mad for learning”? Out of our minds to be more in the mind of Christ? Joyfully taking up this burdensome task along an ever-expanding horizon of things to know and use in being a disciple and making disciples? Or do we prefer to be amused and entertained rather than to apply ourselves to learning Jesus?

When we are as mad for learning as Paul was, we will discover that the Lord can use us in ways we might never have imagined. He will open doors of opportunity for us to use our learning in sharing Jesus with others and encouraging our fellow disciples to seek Him more earnestly. He will delight us with new levels of understanding, as He reveals Himself ever more clearly in His Word and world. As we learn and grow in the mind of Christ, we will know the joy and pleasure of His Presence in new and unforgettable ways each day (Ps. 16.8, 11).

So let us press on to search out and seek the wisdom of God along a curriculum path as broad as life itself, so that we will have whatever we need, at the ready, in whatever situation we find ourselves in service to our God.

We have the mind of Christ! Let's get mad for learning and work hard to grow into that mind, shall we?

For reflection

1. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 2.16 and 2 Corinthians 10.3-5. What is the *mind of Christ*?
2. What does it mean for you to have the mind of Christ? How should having the mind of Christ affect your outlook on the world?
3. Would you describe yourself as *mad for learning*? Why or why not?

Next steps – Demonstration: What opportunities will you have today to live from the mind of Christ and show Jesus to others? Pray about those opportunities and prepare for them now.

5 Press On!

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3.13, 14

Single-minded?

Solomon explained that God has charged us with the burdensome task of searching out, studying, investigating, and learning everything we can so that we might be wise and glorify God in every area of our lives. This should come naturally to every disciple of Jesus Christ, since the root idea of discipleship is “learning.”

Daniel and Paul show us the great benefits and advantages of taking this aspect of our discipleship seriously. Study and learning may be burdensome, but they can lead to wisdom, and help us to fulfill our callings as those who grow in the Lord so that we can teach the things of Christ to others.

This project of lifelong learning must begin in our hearts, as we have seen. Eager to learn and motivated by the fear and love of God, we must set our minds to pursue learning whatever will help us know and serve the Lord; and we must allow nothing to pull us off course in our pursuit of the wisdom of God which is in Jesus Christ.

That’s where Paul was. After a lifetime of being mad for learning, Paul had become, as a follower of Jesus, even more determined to learn everything he could about the Lord, His Kingdom, the people to whom he had been sent, the world around him, and the Lord’s glorious reign on high.

“But one thing I do,” wrote Paul. What was that “one thing”? “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Focused on the goal of Jesus Christ, Paul *pressed on*, learning all he could to better fulfill his calling from the Lord. Do we have that kind of single-mindedness? Can we say that we are *pressing on* toward knowing Christ, and becoming equipped to serve Him with more and more excellence?

Or are our Christian lives given second place to worldly necessities and distractions, cheap thrills, and unrecognized idols that can turn our glorious pursuit of the wisdom of Christ into vanity and grasping after the wind?

How can we develop a program of learning that will equip us – like Daniel and Paul – for whatever the Lord wants to do with our lives?

Three guidelines

I want to suggest three general guidelines for charting a lifelong course for searching out the wisdom of God in Jesus and pressing on in our discipleship.

First, *establish some horizons* for your learning. Consider the places God has put you and the people you see each week. Each of us travels in a variety of cultural arenas – family, neighborhood, work, church, friends, the times we live in, and so forth. Within that framework, we each have a [Personal Mission Field](#) which God has appointed for us – a framework of places we inhabit during the days of our lives. There is much to learn about how to bring the Kingdom of God to bear on these various social and cultural arenas. The Bible has much to say about how the wisdom of God should be expressed in our home, at work, amid the culture of our times, and for the glory of God. We’ll be more effective as disciples if we aim our growth and equipping to address the needs and opportunities of our calling in the world.

At the same time, in that Personal Mission Field, we are involved with many different people – some of them believers, some of them not. As disciples of Christ, we ought to be teachers for such people. We'll want to talk with them and serve them; so, in addition to learning excellence in all the *cultural* arenas of our lives, we'll need to learn a bit about relating to the *specific people* in our lives. Thus we may prepare ourselves for teaching them the things of the Lord.

So already you have identified some subject matter areas for more focused and ongoing study into God's wisdom: culture, relationships, and the times we live in, as these relate to our mission field.

Second (but really first) *lay Scripture and Jesus Christ in the bottom* of your studies. Let the Bible be the foundation and touchstone of all your learning, and Christ the goal you are striving to learn. Let your daily reading and study shed light on the other horizons of your life. Read, meditate, memorize, study with others – pour yourself into learning the Word of God, so that you will have the light it can give to illuminate the rest of your path and all your learning (Pss. 36.9; 119.105).

The founders of Harvard College understood the importance of this; an early motto for that now thoroughly secular university was “to lay Christ in the bottom.” With Christ and His Word as the foundation, all true learning can proceed according to His priorities and plans.

Third, *keep focused on your purpose in life* in all your studies, no matter the subject – the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. We are called to be *disciples* of Jesus Christ – to *follow* Him and *live* for Him, and to encourage and equip others as disciples as well. All fields of learning and study are open to us, to the extent they help us to increase in Christ and excel in our walk with and work for Him.

We don't want our study and learning to leave us, like Solomon, looking at ourselves and admiring all we've managed to learn or do. Our calling as disciples – followers of *Jesus* – must give shape, direction, and wisdom for all our studies, everything we hope to learn. If we can't fit what we're learning into the framework of our calling as disciples, then we need to seek help from others, or consider revising our course.

Mad to excel

Within the parameters marked out by these three guidelines, determine to become, like Paul, mad to learn as much as you can and, like Daniel, to excel as much as possible in whatever you learn. The *burdensome task* of learning can become an exhilarating journey of discovery and ministry if we will take this “affliction” seriously and devote ourselves to knowing and serving the Lord.

This is what it means, as Solomon wrote, to set your heart to learn as much as possible, so you can live as fully as possible as a disciple of the Lord. Press on to learn Jesus and your calling to serve Him! Let this “one thing” command your heart, and you will never regret it.

For reflection

1. How can mapping out your Personal Mission Field help to focus your learning as a follower of Jesus?
2. What does it mean to *lay Scripture in the bottom* of all your learning? Does this describe you? Explain.
3. As you think about your own Personal Mission Field, what areas for more diligent study and learning come to mind?

Next steps – Conversation: What obstacles are preventing you from being a more diligent learner and follower of Christ? How can you overcome these to press on in learning excellence? Talk to a fellow believer about these questions.

6 No End of Books (Thank the Lord!)

The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh. Ecclesiastes 12.11, 12

Wearisome, but necessary

Disciples of Jesus are His students. Disciples are called to learn Jesus (Eph. 4.17-24), and learning Jesus, like all learning, can be hard work (Phil. 2.12). Solomon knew first-hand what a “burdensome task” it can be to learn the wisdom and ways of God. He knew that much study can wear you out – all that reading, pondering, sketching things out, writing things down, looking for applications, talking with others! It’s enough to exhaust even the most devoted student.

No one ever said learning – or discipleship – would be easy.

In the words of our text about the making of books and the need for much study, Solomon was not condemning the life of learning. He was simply making an observation. He has already told us that learning is a “burdensome task,” but he also insisted that God has appointed us the duty of searching out and seeking by wisdom whatever is done under the heavens. We should thank the Lord that the Bible contains many books – in different genre, with different foci, and developing different themes, but one overarching and all-pervading story – and that faithful believers in every age have provided “many books” to guide us in learning Jesus.

The apostle Paul agreed. To achieve the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, we need to *press on*, working diligently to bring every thought captive to obey the Lord, and growing in the mind of Christ day by day. Even near the end of his life, he was still hungry to continue learning from God’s Word and good books, as read we in 2 Timothy 4.13: “Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments.” Of this verse, John Calvin wrote, “It is evident from this, that the Apostle had not given over reading, though he was already preparing for death. Where are those who think that they have made so great progress that they do not need any more exercise? Which of them will dare to compare himself with Paul?”

So while learning can be wearisome, this is no excuse for not taking up the challenge of lifelong learning. A disciple is a *learner*, and a disciple of Jesus – every *follower* of Jesus Christ – will commit to the lifelong pursuit of learning Jesus by every means, and of encouraging other disciples to do the same.

And in that regard, we can be grateful that “of making many books there is no end,” for this means there will always be new things to learn as we press on in our journey toward the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ.

Solomon mainly wanted to warn his son against learning anything that would lead him beyond the firmly fixed and secure words given by the divine Shepherd. God’s Word is the standard of truth, the final bar of appeal in all matters of learning and life, the final filter for a life of learning.

Making the time for reading

And, as part of that life, a commitment to reading.

With so many books available to us it seems a shame not to have a go at reading as many of them as we can. For most of us this will involve two significant challenges.

First, we will need to find the time to *read more*. Right now our time may be filled up with activities we consider to be of the utmost importance. We will do in our lives only and exactly what we *want* to do, and this means that we may be using God’s gift of time right now according to our best interests more than His.

But we should examine our time to consider whether all these activities are helping or hindering our quest for wisdom, Christlikeness, and the Kingdom of God (Eph. 5.15). If we want to read more, we'll need to make more time available, mainly by eliminating things that take up time, but which are not productive of wisdom.

Each of us needs to maintain a continuous watch on the way we use our time. Every moment of time not invested for Christ and His Kingdom will be lost forever. Reserving significant time for reading God's Word and edifying books will pay dividends in discipleship and disciple-making (Col. 4.16).

Reading well

Second, we'll need to adopt a reading plan that is *appropriate to our calling*. We want our reading to complement our study of Scripture in equipping us for the good works essential to following Jesus in our Personal Mission Field. Reading well means *varied* and *close* reading. Strive for a *mix of reading* on various topics that involves books, journals, and the Internet, with your selections made according your calling from the Lord. In reading books, choose from various genre – biography, nonfiction, poetry, history, and so forth – and different eras.

Be diligent to read *closely* in all your reading. This might mean reading slowly and thinking deeply about what you're reading, or talking with a soul friend or study partner. You might also try reading with a pen in hand to make notes, raise questions, and jot down any responses, and especially to reflect on the benefit of your reading for your calling as a follower of King Jesus.

For your reading on the Internet, try to identify a handful of sites which feature writers you trust and which can link you to other relevant articles and sites. That way you cut down on time doing web searches for interesting or relevant articles, or in mindless surfing for nothing in particular.

Be sure to include in your reading of many books, great books from our Christian past. Writers like Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, Lewis, and many others have recorded true and lasting insights that can help us grow in wisdom and equip us for teaching others.

Yes, learning can be difficult; and reading doesn't always excite or enthrall. But thank God for His Word and the many books that can aid us in our walk with and work for Him. Get started on your reading plan at once. Much study can wear us out, it's true; but God has appointed us to it, and, after time in the Word of God, good reading is the vehicle best suited to carry you forward in your life as a disciple-making disciple.

For reflection

1. What are some things that keep us from reading? Which of these are keeping you from reading more?
2. Think of a book that has especially helped you in your discipleship. What did you learn from this book to encourage and guide you in following Jesus?
3. How might Christians encourage one another to read more?

Next steps – Preparation: What will you do to develop and begin following a plan for wider reading in different areas? Talk with your study partner about this question.

7 Be Sure to Learn Christ

But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.
Ephesians 4.20-24

Keep the goal in mind

Every follower of Jesus Christ is a *disciple*, and every disciple is, by definition, a *learner*. All disciples are called to the work of making disciples, leading others to Jesus and helping them to grow in Him. It is essential, in all our learning – whether by reading and study or in classes and conversations – that we keep the goal of wisdom in mind, of being transformed increasingly into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the very Treasury of divine wisdom (Col. 2.2, 3).

We are growing in wisdom when we are growing in Jesus Christ – thinking with His mind (1 Cor. 2.16; 2 Cor. 10.3-5), speaking with His gracious words (Ps. 45.2; Col. 4.6), walking in His Spirit (Gal. 5.16-23), and teaching others about Him and His Kingdom (Acts 1.1-8).

Learning is not *just* an intellectual activity. It is that, of course, but it is much *more* than that. For the disciple of Jesus Christ, the goal of all learning should be to learn Christ, as Paul put it. And if we are learning Jesus Christ, we are becoming new creatures in every aspect of our lives – mind, heart, conscience, words, and deeds – and we are improving our ability to fulfill those discipleship roles – seeker, servant, shepherd, sower, and steward – for which Jesus has sent us into the world.

What does this involve? That is, what should we expect, and for what should we be searching and striving as we pursue our course along the way toward wisdom via a program of lifelong learning? Paul offers us some concise guidelines and landmarks for our journey.

Leave it behind

First, we cannot become like Jesus and grow in the wisdom of God if we insist on holding onto the baggage of folly and sin that we have carried all our lives thus far. We must *put off our old selves*, all those merely frivolous or clearly sinful activities and practices that we loved so well before we got serious about following Jesus.

This requires a careful assessment of how we use our time. We are to make sure our time is being used as wise people, not like fools. Wise people invest their time in the wisdom of the Lord, redeeming each precious moment of time for realizing more of the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Kingdom of God (Eph. 5.1-17; Rom. 14.17, 18).

Whatever in our lives is not preparing or enabling us to live for the glory of God needs to go. We must strip these things off like old clothes and leave them behind, resolving never to take them up again.

This is a daily responsibility which involves us waiting on the Spirit of God to search our lives, and following as He leads us to repent of sin and silliness so that we can take up the journey to wisdom with greater effect (Ps. 139.23, 24). There will be no room to grow in wisdom if we don't repudiate the wasted thoughts, affections, and activities of the past. This is the starting point if we want to learn Christ.

Focus on transformation

But we also need to have a clear and compelling vision of what the life of wisdom looks like. That way we'll be able to identify areas in our own lives where change is needed.

Learning Jesus

For this we need to consider the Lord Jesus Christ, for in Him we may discover all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2.1-3). This means studying and contemplating Jesus not just in the Gospels, but as He appears everywhere in His Word. All Scripture is about Jesus (Jn. 5.39). Therefore, in all our reading of the Word of God, we need to reflect deeply on what each passage can teach us about the Lord Jesus. That way our picture of Him – His priorities, values, holiness, and ways – will become increasingly clear.

Then, with that growing picture of Christ in mind, we can let the Scriptures and our other reading show us areas where we need to change and improve, or where some action on our part may allow us to express the reality of Christ living in us.

We'll also be in a better position to observe the goodness of the Lord, which fills the earth (Ps. 33.5). By focusing on Jesus, we'll see Him refracting His glory in all the everyday situations and things of our lives, leading us to rejoice and give thanks and continue to walk closely with Him.

Desiring Jesus

Considering Jesus means *understanding* what the Scriptures teach about Him and seeing His goodness all around. But it also means *desiring* Jesus, having Jesus and His agenda as the *fixed priority* of our soul, and taking the daily next steps that will see us overcoming the old life of selfishness and sin with the new life in the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will need to step out in faith in new areas of obedience, trusting the Lord to meet us in His power and to enable us to put off the old ways and be clothed with Jesus and His wisdom. We want Jesus, Whom we see throughout His Word and His world, to stretch out within us and transform us increasingly into His own likeness (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Obviously, all this must be bathed in prayer, constant prayer, waiting on the Lord to show us more of Jesus and to guide us in the ways He would manifest Himself in us.

Wisdom is the *goal* of a lifetime of learning, and Jesus is the *embodiment* of the wisdom God intends us to know. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must ever strive to learn Jesus through *all* our learning – as trying, tiring, and tedious as it can sometimes be. No matter how difficult this challenge, the reward of knowing Jesus and seeing His life increasingly manifest in us is worth the struggle of the “burdensome task” of learning.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to *learn* Jesus Christ? How can we tell when we're learning Him?
2. What role do faith and obedience play in learning Jesus? Can you give an example from your own experience?
3. What's one thing you can do more consistently to learn Jesus and follow Him more consistently?

Next steps – Preparation: What is your plan for an improved course of lifelong learning of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Learning Jesus

For reflection or discussion

1. What does it mean to “learn Jesus”? How would you explain this to a new believer?
2. Why should we expect learning Jesus to be a “burdensome task”? Should we allow this to deter us? Explain.
3. What can we do to make sure we don’t lose our way along the path of learning Jesus, like Solomon did?
4. Reading “many books” can help us in learning Jesus. How have you experienced this?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.

