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Discipleship, Step By Step

By: Titus Benton

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I became a dad on May 4th, 2005. Aside from some minor disappointment when my wife couldn't hold off a day and give birth to our child on 05.05.05—a much cooler birth date, if you ask me—I was thrilled beyond belief. In fact, the exact quote, as heard by my wife through the medication was, "Wow. Whoa. Holy smokes." Not exactly theologically deep and spiritual-sounding, but most definitely a heart-felt declaration. It was an incomprehensible moment.

We had a daughter.

I became a dad again on April 13th, 2008. I felt more prepared this time: after raising a child for almost three years, I was finally ready to be the dad to a newborn. Better late than never, I guess. With our two year old waiting in the lobby with grandparents, I watched as my wife brought a baby boy into the world. No silly remarks from me this time, just silent awe. I'll never forget that day.

We now had a son.

Now it's the middle of 2010, and my kids are older. Nora is five and staring kindergarten in the eye. Malachi is two. He's getting ready to conquer the potty and enjoys hitting and kicking things (fortunately, not his sister *too* often). They both talk. They both laugh. They both sleep good at night. They're healthy, beautiful, and fun to be around. I couldn't be more thrilled.

My wife and I are proud parents. It's hard to believe that time is going so fast.

Fellow parents, can I get a witness?

But in other ways, it's hard to measure their growth. In fact, on a day to day basis, I hardly notice. When we see some old friends or catch up with family at an annual holiday celebration, the "I can't believe how much they've grown!" refrain is ubiquitous. But I'm not marveling at their record-setting height every morning when they stumble out of their room for breakfast. I barely notice. Unless you mark your door frames every day, you know what I mean. And even if you do, the pencil mark from today is barely distinguishable from the one from yesterday. The truth is, kids don't actually grow *that* fast.

I have noticed that the same is true in ministry. We are with kids so regularly, and for so long, that day-to-day growth can be hard to identify. Moreover, it seems like growth *isn't* happening, like the indistinguishable lines on a door frame. Are we doing something wrong? Why aren't we witnessing radical change? How broke is the system if we can't see day-to-day growth?

I would propose it's not broken at all. Discipleship isn't discipleship just because we can see stuff. It is often the invisible qualities of a student that really are the product of God moving in a young person's heart. If we wait around to see something before we believe in the Holy Spirit's power, we may end up with a rather thwarted view of sanctification. In fact, if you've worked with Middle School students long, you recognize that they can act on the outside in very different ways than they are feeling on the inside. Behavior is not always an accurate depiction of who they are deep down.

I think of a kid named David. David came into our ministry when he was just in Middle School. In the fall, he was entering 7th grade. But it was summer, and after coming to our Vacation Bible School—we have a Middle School version—we tried to convince David he should go to camp with us. It took some convincing, including a trip to the local restaurant where his mother worked, but we finally convinced him to come. For years David was in and around our ministry. Sometimes he was doing "really good" and sometimes he was "struggling." But those designations were the best we could do to describe what was going on in David's life based on what we could see. He finished high school and moved across the state to college, as prepared as any high school student can be for that transition. He just finished his second or third year in college (I've lost track, to be honest). Last summer he spent the entire break preaching, ministering, and investing in churches, particularly in the inner city of Chicago. He's doing amazing, walking with the Lord, doing ministry, and remaining faithful.

Did you hear me? One minute we're twisting his arm to go to camp, the next minute he's pouring his heart out in the projects in Chicago. What happened to the kid? We almost sent him home from a conference. We

battled attitude, apathy, and a whole host of other adolescent afflictions over the years. From day to day and week to week, he was almost unnoticeably different. But taken objectively, the magnitude of change from 7th grade to college-age is almost incomprehensible. And it didn't happen all of a sudden. It was inch by inch. And we barely noticed right in front of our faces.

Then there's Whitney. Whitney is about David's age. They came to VBS the same year, in fact. Whitney was invited by a friend. She was not a Christian, though she was an awesome kid. Big personality, a lot of fun, cool to be around. She got involved in our ministry, became a follower of Christ, and before long was going to camps and conferences. In high school, she went on a mission's trip. After graduation, she enrolled in Bible college. Currently, she works with at-risk kids with her fiancé, a ministry most would abhor. I will officiate her wedding this year. And as I stand at the altar pronouncing them husband and wife, I will have a vague recollection of the Whitney that was. Right before my eyes, she went from a cool, clever, fun kid to a mature, Spirit-filled, ministry-minded woman. When did it happen?

Does this growth happen during weekly youth group meetings in the middle of gross-out games, pizza feasts, and object lessons? Does discipleship transpire on road trips, at camps, and during conferences? Do kids grow up because of small groups, preaching series, and late-night phone calls? When do these spiritual toddlers that are introduced to us in Middle School become the full-fledged followers of Christ we see later?

Is it the memory work?

Bible Bowl?

Spiritual Retreats?

Float Trips?

Their own quiet times with God?

When we are by their side in crisis?

When we eat lunch with them in their cafeteria?

When we pray with their parents in our office?

When we have Youth Sunday and force them to do stuff?

When we take them to an inner city homeless shelter?

When we play duck, duck, goose?

The answer, of course, is yes. Bit by bit, little by little, disciples are being shaped before our very eyes. Spiritual milk is consumed and meat is craved. Infants become toddlers, toddlers become children, children go through puberty and—eventually—a mature, Christian adult arrives. Has it been no different with us? Do you notice huge leaps and bounds in your own spiritual journey?

Or do you more often sit back and ponder yourself years ago and wonder what happened to the old you? Should we expect any different from the kids we minister to? It may not *seem* like they are growing, but when we look back at today in ten years, I believe there will be much to celebrate.

Discipleship happened right in front of our faces. And realizing we got to be a part of the ride may be the most satisfying part of it all.

Praise God for what we cannot see, but that is happening nonetheless.