

# 8 Tips for Starting a Disciplemaking Relationship

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Let's say you've settled on someone you believe God would like you to disciple. Now what?

When you're beginning a disciplemaking relationship, have an open and honest conversation about your intentions for the relationship. If you don't, you run the risk of being more committed to the relationship than the other person, and subsequently you'll be frustrated when they don't seem to be holding up their end. Plus, imagine if someone tried discipling you without your knowledge or approval. "Why are they telling me what to do all the time? Why do they keep offering unsolicited advice about my walk with God? I didn't ask for this!"

In the words of Brené Brown, "Clear is kind."<sup>1</sup> So sit down with the person you want to disciple and have a heart-to-heart DTR.

## 1. Begin by sharing the "whats."

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What do you want to accomplish in your relationship? Try to avoid any Christianese terms that a young believer or non-Christian may be unfamiliar with, but lay out specifically what you would like to do with them.

"I'd like to read the Bible with you sometime."

"I'd like to share some things that have been helpful for me in my walk with God."

"I'd love to share what I have been learning about prayer lately."

"I'd like to help you grow in your relationship with God."

Sharing the specifics brings clarity to a potentially intimidating conversation, and, in a way, I feel it reminds me as the disciplemaker that disciplemaking isn't as complicated or mysterious or daunting as it can seem.

## 2. Explain the "why."

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Share some of what you've observed about this person and why you want to disciple them.

“I’ve appreciated the questions you’ve asked about Christianity and God over the past few months.”

“When I was a younger Christian, I found it so helpful when someone mentored me in how to walk with God. I’d love to do the same with you.”

“Reading the Bible has been so helpful and comforting for me when I’ve gone through hardship. I wonder if it might be helpful for you with what you’re going through right now.”

I’ve found that people are more likely to respond positively to my disciplemaking overtures if I’m specific about the why and communicate with intentionality. When people sense your genuine care, concern, and appreciation for them, they know they aren’t just a project to you.

### **3. Name the time, the place, and the frequency.**

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The more ambiguous a commitment seems to be, the more fearful people are of entering into it, and the more likely they are to say no. How long are you proposing to meet each week? How many times a week? When? Where? Again, clear is kind.

“We could read the Bible together *once a week over our lunch break*. How does that sound?”

“Could I share some practices that have been helpful to me in my walk with God *while our kids play during our weekly playdates*?”

Naming a specific time, place, and frequency can help you get something on the schedule. We all have a friend we have every intention of catching up with, but we never actually get around to it.

“Hey, we should hang out sometime!”

“Yeah, we totally should!”

“Text me and let me know when you’re free!”

“For sure, I will.”

And repeat previous interaction for forever until the end of time when you realize you never got together.

### **4. Consider how frequently you will meet**

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In disciplemaking, I would generally advise not going more than two weeks without meeting. When I was receiving therapy for anxiety through a health maintenance organization (or HMO), I was allotted only one therapy session a month because my case wasn’t considered severe. It ended up feeling a bit pointless, since I’d come to a session with an issue one

month, and by the time I met with the same therapist the following month, the issue would already be processed and resolved. In the same way, more than two weeks between meetings in a discipleship relationship can quickly lead to a loss of momentum and relevance in the life of the person being disciplined.

## **5. Start with a trial period.**

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Again, if the specifics of the relationship aren't clear, and if the time frame of the commitment seems endless or ambiguous, the person you want to disciple is more likely to say no. Plus, you have no idea how the relationship will pan out! Proposing a trial period will give both of you an out if the relationship isn't the best fit or the timing doesn't seem right. Think of it as going on a few "dates" with a potential disciple before going "steady."

"Maybe we can read the Bible together once a week over our lunch break *for the next month*? How does that sound?"

"Could I share some practices that have been helpful to me in my walk with God during our weekly playdates *for the next couple of weeks*?"

## **6. After the trial period, evaluate whether to continue the discipling relationship.**

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Sometimes I find myself wondering whether the other person feels our times together and what I'm passing on are helpful. Then as I debrief with them, I find out they're not only taking what I've shared to heart and putting new tools into practice, but they're hungry for more! At other times, I have no such doubts, since it's clear that both of us are energized and sharpened by the intentional time together.

In either case, I may propose continuing the relationship: "You know, I've really enjoyed meeting together to talk about spiritual things these past few weeks. Would you want to continue meeting in this way?" Then we'll set another time frame after which we'll reevaluate whether to continue.

If you sense at the end of the trial period that the relationship may not be the best fit or the timing isn't right to continue discipling the other person, thank them for setting aside the time to meet and debrief on what they've learned. Of course, ending a discipling relationship doesn't mean that the relationship itself needs to end or that you'll never share any spiritual truths with that person in the future. It simply means that your capacity is freed up to intentionally invest in someone else.

## **7. Don't let the fear of vulnerability hold you back from initiating a discipling relationship.**

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We've already discussed that one of the major barriers to discipling is a fear of vulnerability. Putting yourself out there and offering something to someone else can make you feel awkward and exposed. What if they don't want what you're offering? What if they say no to being discipled? Even if you have little trouble separating a rejection of an ask from a rejection of self, it can still make you feel vulnerable— because you *are* vulnerable!

More times than not, I find that fear of vulnerability holds me back from discipling more than another person's lack of interest in being discipled. I've yet to ask someone about being discipled who hasn't responded with interest.

## 8. Understanding Your Limits

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Maybe you're feeling really motivated and ready to go with this whole discipling thing. You might even be thinking, *I really don't have a lot of time, but there are two people I'm interested in discipling together. Can I disciple more than one person at a time?*

Of course! I do it all the time, and so did Jesus. The notion that discipling relationships can only be one-on-one is likely a product of our individualistic culture. We can observe from the four Gospels that while Jesus often engaged with the masses, he spent more in-depth time with his twelve disciples, and even more in-depth time with his inner circle, Peter, James, and John. In fact, he revealed his most glorified form only to those three (Matthew 17:1-13). I would caution against discipling too many people at one time if you want to do it well and adequately meet the individual needs of each person in the group. If the Son of God limited himself to an inner circle of three really deep discipling relationships, that's probably a good limit to set for yourself.

I would suggest setting a trial period for meeting together as a group so you can gauge chemistry and fit. You may find that you get along great with each person individually, but they don't get along well with each other. Or you may observe that one person tends to take over the meeting, and the other two rarely share any questions or thoughts. At the end of the trial period, evaluate whether it would be fruitful to continue meeting together.



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