

# Discipleship: Three Keys to Encourage Young Couples

As believers, we are called into a process of ongoing change and transformation. We are called to be disciples of Jesus - to learn from Him and continually become more and more like Him. Discipleship is a maturing process of moving from milk to meat. The encouraging reality is we are not on this journey alone. The Spirit enables us to walk with fellow believers/disciples. Throughout scripture we have models of the younger (milk) learning from the older (meat). Consider Elijah and Elisha, Moses and Joshua, Paul and Timothy, or even Jesus and the disciples. This discipleship model is healthy for married couples as well.

The marriage relationship is designed to reflect the relationship Jesus has with his church or body. It is a witness and testimony of the love Jesus has – therefore it is a praiseworthy pursuit to step into this opportunity to disciple young couples as they grow and mature in their relationship. Whether you consider discipling young couples with excitement or trepidation or both, there are a few important keys to consider.

## FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIP

Let the primary focus be on cultivating a strong relationship with the younger couple. A vibrant relationship takes time, attention, and care. The quality and strength of your relationship with the younger couple will influence how they receive what you share. Couples that feel valued, seen, and listened to are much more likely to be open to receiving counsel, and they are more likely to seek counsel in future years. Additionally, allowing the focus to be on the strength of the relationship takes some of the pressure off you as disciples needing to have it all figured out. It is good to remember the relationship exists for the benefit of the younger couple – although you also will benefit by loving, serving and sharing truth.

Your own marriage relationship will also be important to consider as you invest in a younger couple. You do not need a perfect marriage to disciple other couples. After all, this criterion would obviously eliminate everyone. However, it is critical you attend to and nurture your own marriage relationship. The young couple will notice how you and your spouse interact with each other. Are you respectful and considerate of each other? Do you listen or do you interrupt? Do you affirm your spouse in the presence of the younger couple? The reality is the younger couple will be witnessing how you communicate and treat each other both in and outside the times you meet. Let this be healthy accountability and an opportunity for ongoing enrichment into your own marriage as you pour into others.

## SAFE ENVIRONMENT

The next important area to consider is creating and maintaining a safe environment for the younger couple to share. Remember this younger couple is in a place of vulnerability. This can feel intimidating and can limit open sharing. It is helpful to monitor and maintain emotional safety during your time together to ensure open and honest dialogue. Below are a few ideas to help cultivate a safe environment:

- Don't assume you understand them. Periodically ask them if they feel understood by you.
- Don't problem solve too quickly, if at all - *"be swift to hear, slow to speak"* (James 1:19).
- Be authentic about not having it all figured out – continue to grow and learn.
- Seek to limit ongoing questions that can feel probing – instead share open-ended statements or questions like: "Tell me about your relationship," or "Describe one area you find challenging to navigate in your relationship." Give space and use good questioning so couples can share.
- Seek to understand rather than condemn. Judgement and defensiveness block vulnerability.
- Allow the Word and Holy Spirit to bring conviction.

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- Be patient – growth and change take time.
- Seek to empathize and affirm.
- Meet individually (man with man, woman with woman) on occasion. This provides opportunities for a different experience and sharing. In addition, it is an opportunity for things to be brought up and discussed that couples may not be comfortable to discuss when together.

## KNOW YOUR ROLE AND LIMITS

Part of growing as disciples of Jesus is embracing the discipline of Jesus. This is true whether it comes to spending time in prayer or time discipling younger couples. Jesus willingly took upon himself the constraints of living in a human body, including the need for food, sleep, and solitude. Jesus engaged both times of teaching his disciples (*Matthew 16:5-28, Mark 9:30-50*) and individual prayer (*Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15-16*). In addition, it will be important as you are discipling to be clear with yourselves about what is and what is not your responsibility. Being unclear can lead to burn out, stress, dependency and your role creeping into something that is unrealistic – and perhaps not even what God expects of you. Furthermore, the lack of clarity in your role can create stress which can lead to inadvertently being reactive and less compassionate toward the younger couple you are discipling. This can create an environment that blocks vulnerability and strains the relationship.

Remember and be encouraged that you are not responsible for change or outcome in a young couple's marriage. It is God's work to change and transform. It is your responsibility to be present, engaged, responsive and prepared to be with the younger couple. One of the best ways to do this is by ensuring consistent, quality, personal time with Jesus. In addition, be open with each other as a discipling couple as to what is outside your role. There may be times in the process of discipleship where you need to encourage the younger couple to seek professional counseling. Ongoing addictions, indications of abuse, past or present trauma, signs of persistent disengagement or inability to control emotions in a healthy way are all areas needing professional counseling. Part of providing sound encouragement and advice is to support the younger couple in such cases to seek professional help. Helping a younger couple consider and sharing a vision of what professional counseling even looks like is a healthy, albeit difficult, conversation to have.

## CONCLUSION

Discipleship with younger couples provides the opportunity to be intimately involved in how God is at work in the lives of others. This is sacred ground. It is a place of privilege and opportunity. A place that encourages reflection on the part of those discipling. Reflecting on relationship strength, building a safe environment, and knowing healthy roles and limits can support a healthy and vibrant connection with the younger couple. And it can point them to a closer walk with Jesus and each other, providing true help, hope, and growth.