

“Jesus’ BHAG”
Matthew 28:16-20
May 17, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s sermon title may need some explanation. “BHAG” is an acronym used in some leadership materials, and it stands for “**B**ig, **H**airy, **A**udacious **G**oal.” The idea is that an organization should have a visionary goal that is big enough to capture people’s imagination and motivate their efforts toward a single, worthy goal. For example, at the beginning of the 1960s, President Kennedy announced a BHAG for the entire nation, though he didn’t refer to it by those terms. His big goal was to land a man on the moon before the end of the decade. Jesus announces a much bigger goal here, one that is certain to be achieved because of Jesus and his authority. His goal is that the peoples of the earth would be made his followers, his disciples. Any goal not aligned with Jesus’ goal will become a dead end. Any life that wants to make a difference simply must be aligned with this big goal. Is yours? To help us answer that question, let’s consider this “Great Commission” more carefully.

I. Mission Authority

Jesus’ plan doesn’t sit well with a great many people today. Since the making of disciples first requires a conversion, and since conversion is all about proselytizing, and since proselytism is a dirty word in our culture, this whole passage is distasteful to modern ears. People ask, “Why can’t people just be left alone to decide their own religious convictions?”

Not long ago, a woman who visited our church approached me to tell me that she loved our beautiful building and the nice people who were here. But she had an objection she wanted to share. She had seen our missionary board and said that it was wrong to send missionaries. We should just let people make their own decisions about such things and not try to convince them to adopt our convictions. How do we respond to this objection? There are many appropriate responses, but I think the best one is simply to take people to the authority of Jesus. The one with all power and authority, both in heaven and on the earth, is the one who gives this commission. We don’t seek to disciple the nations on our own authority, but on the authority of Jesus.

I think that one of the mistakes that is sometimes made in preaching this passage is to focus primarily on the duty it presents to us. Though it’s undeniable that this is a duty Jesus lays on us, emphasizing that fact usually only leads either to guilt or to half-hearted obedience. I think it’s better to

emphasize Jesus' authority, which is what Jesus himself does, indicated by the fact that he mentions this first.

This statement of Jesus' complete and extensive authority raises a question. Why are there still so many evil things on an earth where Jesus has such comprehensive power and authority? The Bible offers two significant answers to that question. First, Jesus is delaying the final answer to evil, which is judgment. Why is he delaying it? A verse in 2 Peter answers that question. **"The Lord...is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"** (3:9). A second answer can be seen here in our text. Jesus' authority is so great that he can use even evil to accomplish his good purposes. He knows how to draw a straight line with a crooked stick. The death of Jesus is the best illustration of that. The greatest evil ever perpetrated, the execution of the innocent Son of God, turns out to be the salvation of the world.

We also see Jesus' ability to use evil for his good purposes in the statement about the disciples. Did your ears perk up when Matthew reported that when the eleven disciples saw the resurrected Jesus, **"they worshiped him, but some doubted"** (v. 17)? How could there be this mixed response when they are seeing the resurrected Jesus, standing right in front of them? But isn't that where we all live, marked somewhat by a bipolar existence that includes both worship and doubt. The Church is this imperfect mix of worship and doubt. Our hope for the nations coming to worship Jesus is not found in the greatness of the Church, but in the greatness of Jesus.

This brings up an important application before moving to our next point. Don't let the failings of the Church discourage you from pursuing the great work Jesus has given to us. I have been around the Church long enough, and at a deep enough level, that I have seen how the sausage is made. It's not always attractive. But we must not allow the inevitable, unattractive features of the Church divert us from our calling. I notice that Jesus does that here. He doesn't even attempt to correct their doubt. He simply asserts his authority. He is the Chief Executive Officer of heaven and earth. As the familiar song says, "He's got the whole world in his hands." That's where our focus needs to be.

II. Mission Goal – Making Disciples

Verses 19-20 have four verbs that describe our mission: going, discipling, baptizing and teaching. However, the four are not parallel to one another. One of them is the main verb, and the other three describe how we are to go about achieving that primary task. In other words, Jesus is not commanding four different activities, but one activity with three components. The one activity is to disciple the nations, and we make disciples by going, baptizing and teaching.

Let's consider first what Jesus means by the nations that are to be discipled. It doesn't refer to political entities, because those are always changing. The Greek word used here is *ethne*, from which we get our word "ethnic." Missiologists refer to this today as a "people group." This is a group with the same language and culture, and often multiple ethnic groups exist within a single nation. So *ethne* refers to a group of people who are similar enough to one another that the gospel can spread among them without converts having to embrace a foreign language or culture. One of the mistakes Christian missionaries have sometimes made is to elevate their own culture to the point that these people groups are required to adopt a foreign culture along with the gospel. Such things as music, leadership styles, dress and style of preaching should be adapted to fit the particular ethnic group. By doing so, Christian missionaries serve not to eradicate a culture and language, but to preserve it.

Jesus wants these people groups to be discipled. The goal is not merely to make converts, although a disciple must start out as a convert. The goal is to make a follower of Christ. In the days when this was written, a disciple was a student aligning himself to a teacher. The closest idea in our language is the mentoring or apprenticing relationship. Two features of such discipleship are its requirement of time and the necessity of a relationship. Discipleship defies efforts at scalability. Do you know that word? Businessmen will often talk about the virtues of scalability, by which they mean that some product to be sold or service to be offered can be produced in large numbers without an equal amount of input. Manufacturing something with robots is scalable. Counseling practices are not. Nor is discipleship. It is an unavoidably slow, inefficient process because it is necessarily relational and time-consuming. Yet this is what Jesus calls us to do.

III. Mission Activities – Going, Baptizing and Teaching

Three verbs, all participles in the original, describe what we actually do to make disciples. One of them, "going," appears before the command to make disciples, and the other two, "baptizing" and "teaching" appear after. So I think the idea is this: we make disciples through baptizing and teaching, but both baptizing and teaching require going.

So let's start with "going." The making of disciples is always going to require some element of risk-taking initiative. This is the case throughout the Bible. When God called Abraham and promised that he would be a blessing to the whole world, he told him to go to a land God would show him. Abraham had to leave his homeland and go to a place of strangers, where he was not on his "home turf." Jonah had the same experience, when God told him to leave his homeland and go to the Assyrian city, Nineveh. I don't think this means that all of us are called to leave Birmingham and go to some far-flung region of the

world. What it does mean is that all ministry, whether the work of evangelism or that of Christian education and discipleship within the church, requires some element of an uncomfortable going.

This going speaks of two elements of all ministry: weakness and love. To go as Abraham and Jonah did feels like weakness. They left a place of comfort, familiarity and influence, and went to a place where they had none of those things. The opposite of going is staying, and it is often the case that staying is motivated by the desire to avoid the inevitable weakness of going, of reaching out to someone. To say this differently, going requires risk-taking. It could be something as minor as making a phone call to someone. How many times have you felt reticent to make such a call because you weren't sure how it would be received? I was on a group bicycle ride a week ago, and the ride leader asked all seven of us to stop at a house we were riding in front of. This ride leader is a brother in Christ, and after we stopped, he told us that it was a house belonging to the mother of someone on our ride, and this mother was battling breast cancer. Most of the people I ride with know I'm a pastor, and he asked me if I would pray for this woman, which I gladly did. He took a risk in that, but he listened to the prompting of God's Spirit and acted in obedience.

Going also communicates love because presence is an effective way to love. A parent who tells his children that he loves them but is never present for them doesn't really love them. Adult children who are never present with their parents reveal the same. We'll explore further this idea of going as we talk about each of the next two activities.

Jesus tells the eleven to make disciples by **“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (v. 19). This is one of the key verses in the Bible on the doctrine of the trinity, teaching one God existing in three persons. Note that “name” is singular, indicating only one God. When Jesus speaks of baptizing, he is using it as a summary for evangelism and conversion. The making of disciples requires evangelism, and those who respond in faith are to be baptized. What does it mean to be baptized? It means more than to get wet in a church service. It means basically the same thing that Jesus' baptism meant. When Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven said, **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”** (Matt. 3:17). And also the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. So our baptism means that the Father is pleased with us, which can't happen unless our sins are forgiven. The baptized are now members of God's family, and the Holy Spirit rests upon them with the gentleness of a dove. Peter taught these same two things when he was preaching on the day of Pentecost. When his hearers were convicted of their sin and asked Peter what they should do, he said, **“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”** (Acts 2:38).

So we are to go out, form friendships with neighbors, co-workers and others. We are to pray and look for opportunities to speak to them about the truth of Jesus. And when God grants faith to them, they are to be baptized into the membership of the church. Jesus assumes here that a disciple is connected to the church. So is there some action God is calling you to take in this area?

Once a person is baptized into the membership of the church, they are to be taught to observe all that Jesus commanded. This is a lifelong endeavor. Note the emphasis on application. Disciples are to be taught not just to know Jesus' commands, but to *observe* them. This, too, is part of the Great Commission. We often limit our application of the Great Commission to evangelism, but it extends much further than that.

This part of discipleship also requires an element of risk-taking "going" that often feels like weakness. Another brother I ride bikes with leads a Junior High boys discipleship group. He told me about the challenge it has been to lead them via Zoom calls. If you want to feel the kind of weakness that requires deep trust in God, try teaching children via Zoom. But I think this is also true of all discipleship ministry. That's why Jesus' final promise is so crucial.

IV. Mission Enabling – The Presence of Jesus

Jesus promised, "**And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**" (v. 20). I think Jesus is promising more here than the kind of presence that is always true of God. He is promising the sweetness of an experience of his presence, given through the Holy Spirit. We are, in a sense, working shoulder to shoulder with Jesus when we are engaged in this commission, because this is what Jesus is doing. The presence of Jesus is the dominating feature of heaven. This is the way today that we bring heaven to earth.

CONCLUSION:

I like Frederick Bruner's summary of this passage.

Teaching is another slow word. All three of the main responsibility verbs in this commission—disciple, baptize, teach—are three slow, corporate, and earthy ways of circling the same object, saying the same thing: disciple people—take your time with them, work carefully with them, bring them along gently. First, we disciple by living among people and talking with the inquiring; then by baptizing the convinced in a simple church meeting; and then by teaching the baptized and ourselves an ever-increasing loyalty to Jesus' commands.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 28:16-20

1. Which AVPC-supported missionary are you most familiar with? How would you summarize their work, particularly relating it to the Great Commission? What is the greatest challenge of their work?
2. Matthew reports that the eleven disciples both worshiped and doubted. Jesus didn't address their doubts at all, but simply gave them this commission. Is there a relationship between faithfulness to this commission and fighting doubts in our lives?
3. Jesus introduces this commission by claiming all authority in heaven and earth. Why did he start with that? How does that claim related to this commission? Do you see any area in your life where you are not believing that Jesus has all power and authority?
4. Why is the first word of Jesus' commission to "go," even though not everyone is called literally to leave home and go somewhere else? As a matter of fact, most of us will not be called to do so. Yet, the command still applies to us. How?
5. What is the most risk-taking ministry God has ever called you to? Is he calling you to anything now that requires such risk-taking?
6. Read this summary of the passage from Frederick Bruner and then discuss any way this might apply to you.

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7. Jesus promises to be with us to the end of the age. This is a promise of an experience of his presence, not just knowing about his presence. What is such an experience like?