

“The Most Famous Great Commission”
Matthew 28:16-20
November 22, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

We are spending several months considering the topic of the mission of the church. We saw last week that God’s big story is that he is making a home in which to live with his people. That was the original purpose of the garden of Eden, and the same Edenic language is used to describe our eternal home with God (Rev. 22). Everything in between is the story of God bringing his people back to his home in Eden. The Bible is clear in teaching that God will do this. It is not our responsibility to make it happen. We don’t bring in the kingdom—God does. What then does he ask us to do in this grand project of his?

The clearest statements in the Bible that answer the question of what Jesus asks us to do are the “great commission” texts of the New Testament. There are several of these in the gospels and Acts, and we plan to look at three of them. We are right to give added emphasis to these commissions, because they all come at the end of Jesus’ time on the earth. They occur after his death and resurrection and just prior to his ascension. Common sense tells us that a person’s last words just before departing are significant, and these are Jesus’ last words. Of course, all of Jesus’ words are significant, but his last words could be thought of as being underlined or printed in bold type.

We want to begin today with the great commission that is the most well-known, as well as the most extensive. It is the one from Matthew. The setting of this commission adds even more emphasis. **“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them”** (v. 16). In Matthew’s gospel, important things happen on mountains. Jesus gave a famous sermon on a mountain and was transfigured on one as well. And now he delivers his last instructions to his disciples.

I. Jesus’ People

The circumstances surrounding this final meeting between Jesus and his disciples have several things to teach us. I note first that Jesus brings the eleven remaining disciples together for this commission, rather than speaking to them each individually. He met with them corporately rather than individually. Jesus still does the same today, meeting with his people as they gather into communities called the “church.” We see this lived out in the book of Acts in the call of Paul and Barnabas to launch their first missionary trip. It was while the church was gathered for corporate worship that the Holy Spirit directed them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work (Acts 13:2).

I also notice here that the church Jesus meets with and to whom he gives this commission is a flawed church. There are only eleven disciples meeting with him here, though there were originally twelve. We all know what happened to the twelfth. Judas betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide. The church started as a mixed bag, containing both the faithful and hypocritical pretenders such as Judas. Though it still continues today in its “elevenish” nature, the important mission given to the church by Jesus must still be pursued.

Even the eleven who are left are far less than perfect, consisting of some who doubted. **“And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted”** (v. 17). Their doubt did not arise from lack of evidence. They had all witnessed the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, and here he was standing right in front of them. In spite of that, doubts were still present. There was something of a bipolar nature to this early church, with this mixture of worship and doubt. It is still the same today. The application of this is that we must not let the inevitable and ever-present deficiencies of the church discourage us from pursuing the mission Jesus gives to us. The temptation to be resisted is to put aside Jesus’ mission for us until we can get our house in order. But the reality is that our house will never be in complete order until Jesus returns.

II. Jesus’ Sandwich

My use of the word “sandwich” requires some explanation. I’m not referring to something Jesus was eating here, but rather to the literary structure of the passage. The central command of verses 19-20 is preceded by a statement from Jesus and concluded with a wonderful promise from Jesus. Both of these statements are needed for the difficult mission Jesus is going to ask of his followers.

The first statement is Jesus’ claim that **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”** (v. 18). The authority Jesus claims for himself is the authority to rule and control all things. His authority is not just in the realm of heaven, but also on the earth. And he says that he has “*all* authority.” There is no corner of our vast universe to which Jesus’ authority does not extend. He has ultimate veto power, and no one is able to veto his decisions. We go forth in our work of missions, evangelism and discipleship under the authority of Jesus.

Many do not submit to the authority of Jesus, but that should never be the case in the Church. Jesus is our Lord, and it is his authoritative command that directs us in this great commission. Jesus is the commander in chief. One aspect of Jesus’ authority is that he has the whole picture in mind. Think of a general commanding his army. It is the responsibility of the general to have the whole picture of the battle in his mind. Those serving under the general don’t

need to be told what the big picture is. They only need to know that their general knows that picture and gives orders that come from his awareness of the big picture. Jesus' claim for all authority means that he does have the big picture in mind. We saw last week what that big picture is. Jesus is restoring his home in paradise, a home in which he will live with his people forever. A second Eden is coming, and Jesus will do it. As we've already mentioned, our role isn't to bring in the kingdom because that is Jesus' role. He has his master plan and it cannot fail. But there is a part our general has given to us, expressed in this commission.

Jesus concludes his command to us with a reassuring promise. **“And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age”** (v. 20). His promise to be with us to the end of the age makes it clear that this is not a command given only to the eleven disciples gathered before him, but rather a command given to his church until this age ends with the return of Jesus. Jesus' promise is more than a claim of being present in the sense that Jesus is always present. We refer to one of God's attributes as that of “omnipresence,” meaning that God is present everywhere. That is always true of God no matter what. What he is promising here is an experience of that presence. It is the sweetness of an experience of his presence, given by 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, and we can taste of that heavenly joy as we partner with Jesus in this work.

The authority and presence of Jesus are promised here because we need those things for the boldness required in this mission. Boldness is required because this mission requires that we go against the grain of our culture, which says that we ought to let everyone decide their own religious convictions. We should never urge someone else to adopt our religious convictions, this line of thought says. But we boldly renounce this because of Jesus' authority. 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. Our response is simply to refer to the authority of Jesus. He is the one commanding us to do this.

III. Jesus' Command

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. 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. In a word, the mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations, all people groups.

Our central mission is to make disciples. There are many other needs people have. They need food, security, shelter, policemen to provide a safe and law-abiding society, job skills and many other things. The church may at times decide to help with some of those, but they are not our central role. That central role is the making of disciples. This is illustrated by an influential and important book that was written back in 2009 called *When Helping Hurts*. The main point of the book is that if we help people without discipling them, we end up hurting them. There are many helpful programs out there designed to address the needs people have. But those programs are unable to change a person's heart. That's where the church comes in. It is as we disciple people in the gospel that hearts begin to change, and that is our mission.

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. So two features of discipleship are its requirement of time and the necessity of a relationship. Discipleship defies efforts at scalability, which is something our efficiency-oriented culture is drawn to. Do you know that word? Businessmen will often talk about the virtues of scalability, by which they mean that some product to be sold can be produced in large number 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.

The three verbs that describe how we go about the process of making disciples are all participles. 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 Assyria's capital 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. 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? Not only does going require the weakness of risk-taking, but also the love of being present with someone. To go means to be present with someone. I heard someone ask this week, "How do you spell love?" The answer: "T-I-M-E".

The next participle is "baptizing." This one speaks of the importance of the community life of the church. Baptism is the mark given to someone when they first become part of the visible church. We might say, "It takes a village to make a disciple." The New Testament knows nothing of disciples of Christ existing entirely separate from the visible church. To be a follower of Christ is to be part of the church, and one's participation in the church becomes an essential means of growth as a disciple.

Next, we make disciples by teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. Note the emphasis Jesus gives to application here. Disciples are not just to be taught to know Jesus' commands, but to obey them. Teaching is an inherently slow process, requiring time and patience. Children are not taught to read in a day. It requires a process beginning with teaching them the alphabet and the sounds letters make. It requires reading to them and patiently helping them in their first fumbling efforts to sound out words.

This emphasis on obeying Jesus' teachings invites an application. Are you being disciplined more by Jesus' teachings or by something else? I read an alarming statistic this week about the average daily screen time for an adult in the U.S. In 2018 it was 8.5 hours per day, while in March of this year it increased to 13.5 hours per day, a five-hour increase. That means that the average adult is spending over 90 hours every week looking at some screen. Much of that is likely work-related, but it also includes large amounts of time in social media, podcasts, news stories and various videos and movies. So the application is this: Are you being disciplined more by Jesus or by your screen?

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 relate 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?