

The Great Commission

MATTHEW 28:16-20

**Baxter T. Exum (#1277)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
August 31, 2014**



This morning we have obviously been looking at various passages about the importance of passing along the good news. We have an amazing story to tell, we have the privilege of going to God in prayer and asking for his help, we have a worldwide mission, and then also (as we sang about right before the lesson), all of this is very personal – in other words, we want God to use us, we want to be the ones who are willing to speak up.

With all of this in mind, I would invite you to turn with me to the last few verses in the New Testament book of Matthew (p. 1557) – Matthew 28:16-20. At the end of Matthew, of course, the Lord has completed 3-½ years of teaching and preaching, he has been crucified, he has just come back from the dead, and now he is getting ready to ascend back into heaven, leaving his disciples to his mission. At the end of Matthew, therefore, we have some of the Lord's last words here on this earth, in a passage that is sometimes referred to as the "Great Commission."

We might think of parents who are leaving their children with a babysitter for a few days before they go out of town for whatever reason. As they leave, they will obviously have some parting words – this is what you need to know, this is important, this is what we want you to do. And that is the idea here as Jesus sets the mission in place. This is what the Lord wants his people to do as he is gone and until he comes back. If you will, please look with me at Matthew 28:16-20,

¹⁶ But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.

¹⁷ When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. ¹⁸ And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

For just a few moments, I would like for us to keep our thoughts focused on these very important words as we make some observations that we can apply to our situation here in Madison, nearly 2000 years after these words were first spoken. And again, these words are so important. As we sometimes sing, these are "...ancient words, ever true, changing me and changing you." These words mean everything to us. So, looking back at this

little paragraph, what do we need to know? What do we need to learn? What do we need to change? What does this passage mean for us in very practical terms?

- I. **As we look at these five verses, one of the first very practical lessons we see here is that Jesus wants us to REACH OUT TO ALL PEOPLE, and THIS MISSION STARTS RIGHT WHERE WE ARE, RIGHT NOW!**

Nearly all of the commentaries on this passage point out something very interesting about the grammar of the opening words of verse 19 in the Greek language. In most of our English translations, the main command of the Great Commission appears to be **“Go,”** as if we are located in one place, and in order to fulfill the command, we need to move to another location before we start preaching and teaching – as if we need to move from Madison to some other place in order to do what the Lord is commanding us to do here, as if we need to **“go”** from here to there before we do this preaching and teaching.

However, the scholars and language experts point out that as far as grammar is concerned, the only real command in the Great Commission is to **“make disciples.”** We will get to making disciples in just a little bit. But I want to make sure we get this here at the beginning: The **“go”** at the beginning of verse 19 would be more accurately translated as, **“As you are going,”** or even, **“Having gone.”** To me, that really changes the meaning of the Great Commission, doesn’t it? **“Having gone into all the world, we are to make disciples of all the people around us.”** So here we are in Madison, Wisconsin, thousands of miles from Jerusalem, where this command was first given. Not only that, but we are nearly 2000 years removed from the first giving of this command. In other words, those of us in this building right now are the ones who have gone into all the world! We are the ones Jesus was referring to in verse 19. And now that we have gone into the world, our mission is to make disciples. In other words, now that we are here (separated by distance and by time), we fulfill the Lord’s command by reaching out to all people – right here, right now! Having gone (in a sense) from Jerusalem to Madison, this statement applies to us personally, even very specifically. Having gone to work this morning, I am to make disciples of those around me. Having gone to the grocery store, having gone to school, having gone across the street to a friend’s house, having gone, I am to make disciples of those people who are around me, wherever I have gone.

And when we look at the statistics, this is how the church grows. On Wednesday evening a week and a half ago, those of you who were there might remember how we went around the room and just briefly shared how each of us found out about the Lord’s church for the very first time. Generally speaking, those of us in this room were not converted by a missionary who traveled thousands of miles to preach the gospel to us in some kind of special meeting. Generally speaking, we were not converted by a television program, or by an ad in the paper, or by any of these other methods that get so much attention sometimes. Instead, by a vast majority (at roughly 90% or more), those of us in this room were brought to the Lord by our families, by our friends, and by our neighbors. Having gone into the world, somebody taught US. And now, having gone into the world ourselves, we also fulfill the Great Commission by teaching those around us. So, first of all, the Lord wants us to reach out to those around us, and the mission starts right where we are – right here, right now!

- II. **There is something else we need to get out of this passage, and it goes back to the idea that the main command in this passage is to MAKE DISCIPLES.**

Again, the main point here is that we are to **“make disciples.”** We do this by going, by baptizing and by teaching. In one of his articles on this passage, Stan Mitchell compares it to a parent telling his child to clean his room. Cleaning the room is the command, and then the parent tells the child that he is to clean by

“vacuuming, by dusting, and by picking up his toys.” Those three participles explain how the cleaning of the room is to be carried out. In the same way, the main command is to ***“make disciples.”*** We make disciples by going, by baptizing, and by teaching.

What, then, is a disciple? The root of the word ***“disciple”*** is also the root of our English word “mathematics.” And the root word itself refers to being a student. It refers to being a pupil. When we make disciples, therefore, we are making people students of Jesus Christ. We are pointing people to the Lord. We are saying: Look, the Lord has something to teach us. The Lord has given us something to study, something we need to absorb. As Christians, therefore, we are to be dedicated to teaching the world about Jesus, making disciples. We are making people followers of Jesus. We teach, we baptize, and we continue teaching.

We could go over to Mark’s account of the Great Commission, and we see this process emphasized. We see the importance of it. Keeping a finger here in Matthew 28, we could turn over to Mark 16:15-16 (p. 1592), just one book over. And over in Mark 16:15-16, please notice how important it is that we teach and baptize. In Mark 16:15-16, Jesus says to the apostles, ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”*** How important is it that we ***“make disciples”***? Our mission has eternal importance! Those who do not believe the Lord, those who do not become disciples of the Lord, those who are not baptized, will be ***“condemned.”*** Imagine the shock of facing God in judgment, having never heard of Jesus Christ. Now imagine being a friend or a neighbor of a member of this congregation. The sentence is handed down from God’s throne: Eternal separation from God, because you did not believe and obey the good news. Now imagine that person turning to us: Why didn’t you tell me about this? Why didn’t you warn me that this was coming? We went to school together, we cooked out in the backyard together, we gave each other’s children rides to school, we went fishing together, why would you not tell me about this great Day of Judgment that has now arrived? Why would you not tell me about the importance of belief, repentance, and baptism?

Sometimes we sing about this, “When in the better land before the bar we stand,” (and the reference here is not to a “bar” like we might think about here in Wisconsin – the reference here is to the “bar” of judgment – like lawyers must “pass the bar,” as attorneys might ask the judge for a “sidebar,” the bar of judgment), “When in the better land before the bar we stand, how deeply moved our souls will be; If any lost one there should cry in deep despair, ‘You never mentioned Him to me. You helped me not the light to see; You met me day by day and knew I was astray, yet never mentioned Him to me.’ What a horrible scenario that would be!

The emphasis in this passage, therefore, is on ***“making disciples.”*** We are to make people students of Jesus Christ. This is our mission in life. This is our mission as individuals. This is our mission as a congregation. We are to make people students of Jesus. We are to ***“make disciples.”***

III. There is something else I’d like for us to notice in this passage today, and that is: There is an emphasis here on the WORD OF GOD.

In fact, we see this in all three parallel accounts. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus said that we are to teach people ***“all that I have commanded you,”*** a reference to all of the words spoken by Jesus over the past 3-½ years. By the way, when Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote their books of the Bible, they were doing exactly what Jesus had commanded them to do. They wrote the words of Jesus so that those words could be passed down through the generations. And this is a cycle. We are to teach and baptize, and then we are to teach others to teach others. It is a never-ending cycle. We think of farmers who plant corn. Not all corn is planted to be eaten. Some corn is planted for seed. And that is what we see here. So, this is Matthew’s account – an

emphasis on the word of God – the disciples were to teach all that the Lord had commanded them. They were to teach the word of God to others, who were to teach others, who were to teach others, and so on.

In Mark's account we have something similar as the disciples were told to preach the GOSPEL. Again, as Jesus said in Mark 16:15 (as we read it earlier), ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation,"*** an emphasis on preaching the gospel. Literally, the ***"gospel"*** is the ***"good news,"*** the good news about the Lord's death, burial and resurrection.

And then, over in Luke's account we have a passage that is somewhat parallel to Matthew and Mark, and in that passage (in Luke 24:45-46), the Bible says, ***"Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day...,'"*** a reference to the written word of God. Jesus based the Great Commission on the word of God.

There are a thousand gimmicks we could use to try to manipulate or trick people into becoming Christians, but the word of God, the gospel, is God's power for salvation. We understand the words of Peter in 1 Peter 1:23, ***"...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God."*** This is why our weekly lessons and all of our Bible classes are based almost exclusively on God's word. We aren't studying what some guy has said about the word, but we get ourselves into the word of God itself. When we teach and preach, we teach and preach the word of God.

Conclusion:

As we close, I want to make sure that all of us have the latest card that we offer as a congregation. I would ask that we take one and pass it on. In the past, our focus has been on offering the Bible correspondence course. And that is important. We still have those cards on the table in the entryway. But this new card, as you will see, is intended more as a personal invitation. I have put several of these in each bag, along with two of our new wooden nickels, enough material to make one contact every day for a week. And the point of this is to give each of us a reminder. We'll put the extras on the table in the entryway. Personally, we keep something like this with us at all times – in each car, with me personally, at work, wherever we go. And here at the end, I would make a suggestion: Over the next week, let's see if we can keep our eyes open for opportunities for telling somebody about the Lord. As a congregation, we know what works. Most of us obeyed the gospel when we were taught personally by somebody in the family or by a close friend or neighbor. This is what works, and so the message is: Let us go out and do more of that!

This morning, then, we have studied some of the last words of Jesus here on this earth. We have learned, first of all, that we can fulfill this great challenge right here where we are, right now, us, we can do this! Secondly, our primary mission is to make people students of Jesus Christ, followers of Christ, disciples of Christ. This happens when the people in our lives hear the gospel, believe in Jesus, repent of their sins, and are baptized, buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. And then finally, we have learned this morning that all of this is based on the word of God – not on our opinions, but on the word of God itself.

There may be those here this morning who have never truly become disciples of Jesus Christ. This morning, we would encourage you to investigate. We would encourage you to listen to His voice in the written word. Accept Jesus as your teacher. Become his student. We do that by learning his word and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism. 2,000 years after these words were first written, the Bible still teaches that those who have believed and have been baptized will be saved. Baptism is a burial in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions about God's plan, let us know. If you have something we need to pray

about as a congregation, let us know. But if you know what you need to do, if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com