

MATT 28:16-20—THE GREAT COMMISSION

INTRO: Whenever anyone you love is going away—either he is about to die or is going on a long journey and knows he will never see you again—the person who is leaving will always want to leave you with words of importance. In those circumstances, you won't chit-chat about the weather or football. Instead, if you are the one who is leaving, you will tell those you love how you feel about them and the things they will need to know and to do to carry on after you have gone.

The same was true with Jesus. On the night before he died, in **John 17**, he prayed his last big prayer—called the “High Priestly Prayer.” He prayed the things that were on his mind and were most important to him. What was most important to him? In **John 17:21** he prayed [READ]. He was praying for the unity of believers.

But Jesus knew that after his death, he would rise from the grave and see his followers again. And he did so. He appeared to them and instructed them for 40 days after his resurrection. But then there came the time when he knew he would be returning to the Father in heaven, from where he had come. In the gospel of Matthew, after he rose from the dead, Jesus told his disciples to go to Galilee where he would meet them. The last five verses of **Matthew 28** recount that meeting.

This account is known as the “Great Commission.” It is important because it is the last words of Jesus reported by Matthew before Jesus' ascension back to the Father. Although we can infer from the other gospels that Jesus appeared to the disciples on other occasions after this (Luke, for example, indicates that Jesus ascended back to the Father from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem), Matthew ends his gospel with this account from Galilee. This account summarizes Jesus' commission not only to the 11 apostles, but to us.

His actual commission to us consists of only 50 words in the Greek, yet it summarizes the most important things we need to know and do. In many respects, it is a summary of the gospel itself. Therefore, Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus' most important message to us before he left the earth and returned to heaven. That's why this is so important. [READ MATT 28:16-20]

PROP: What Jesus is telling us is this: **Our life is to be like his: We are to make disciples of others, just like he made disciples of us; and we won't have to do it alone, for he will always be with us.**

O/S: We will consider four things from this passage: (1) What we are like (vv. 16-17); (2) What Jesus is like and his relationship with us (vv. 18; 20b); (3) His commission to us (vv. 19-20a); (4) How we can apply this and implications of this for our lives.

I. What we are like (vv. 16-17)

On the day of his resurrection, **Matt 28:10** tells us that Jesus told the women at the tomb that they were to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. **v. 16** tells us that Jesus had designated a particular mountain in Galilee where the disciples were to meet him. That undoubtedly was the mountain on which Jesus had preached the “Sermon on the Mount” in **Matthew 5-7**. It was also probably the Mount of Transfiguration in **Matthew 17**. Because it was that mountain, the disciples would have known and expected that Jesus would be telling them something of vital importance. And that's exactly what happened.

v. 17 then tells us [READ]. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that only God is to be worshipped. The worship of mere mortals or even angels is idolatrous and sinful. Jesus alone was different. Not only here but on multiple other occasions, people worshipped or prayed to Jesus as they would to God Himself. *Jesus accepted their worship.* The response of Jesus in accepting worship would be blasphemy for anyone if he were only a man. The fact that Jesus accepted people's worshipping him showed that he knew he was God who had come to earth as a man—because only by being God come to earth as a man could Jesus legitimately accept being worshipped.

But the most interesting thing is that **v. 17** also reports that “**some were doubtful.**” This is one marker by which we know we can trust the Bible. If the Bible had been made up long after the fact, they never would have recorded that some had doubts. It would have pictured the disciples as champions of faith. Matthew selects a specific Greek word to specify this doubt. He has used it only once before, when Simon Peter tried to walk on the water and then began to sink; Jesus said to him: “**You of little faith, why did you doubt?**” (**Matt 14:31**). The meaning there, and here in **v. 17**, is more akin to hesitation than to frank disbelief.

This is important for us. It is telling us that the disciples who received the Great Commission are not idyllic specimens of vigorous faith and courage. Rather, they are hesitant, they are somewhat unsure, they are like Peter of “**little faith.**” They are like the father of the demon-possessed boy who said, “**Lord I believe, help my unbelief.**” They are very much like us. This likeness to us may be uncomfortable, yet it is also reassuring.

Jesus chose disciples like that, just as he chooses us. They were no different from us, and they turned the world upside down—so can we. That leads us to:

II. What Jesus is like and his relationship with us (vv. 18; 20b)

Jesus' actual commission to his disciples is bracketed by words of reassurance and encouragement to us. Those words are his description of himself in v. 18—**“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth”**—and his relationship with us in v. 20b—**“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** Isn't it amazing that, of his 50 words in this Great Commission, fully half of them are direct reassurance and encouragement.

v. 18 has been called the “Great Assurance.” IOW, it is not some fallible person we are following but, as **Heb 1:3** says, Jesus **“upholds all things by the word of his power.”** Remember: regardless of what we may be going through, we are never alone, because he said, **“I am with you always”**—we are united with the greatest power in the universe—in fact, the one who keeps the entire universe going! That means we can go out with confidence. We don't have to be afraid to talk with people about Jesus, because he is right there with us.

Jesus made that very clear—he has *not* left us alone to carry out his commission. He has given us the ability to do everything he has told us to do. In fact, he has done far more than just being with us. **Ezek 36:26** tells us that in Christ we have a new heart; we have a new mind—the mind of Christ (according to **1 Cor 2:16**); we have a new set of values and a new set of priorities. And he gives us a greater power, a supernatural power—Himself, through the HS—who is active and working in us. **Phil 2:12-13** says, **“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”** He is the one working in us; he enables us to think as he thinks, live as He lived, and do what he has commissioned us to do.

Notice something else. Who Jesus is directly relates to what he has commissioned us to do. As one commentator points out, the Great Commission is nothing else but the consequence of the Great Assurance: v. 19 begins, **“Go therefore.** The “Therefore” is saying, **“Because I, Jesus, already have all authority over the nations, your mission is to introduce the people to the reality of My dominion, and I will enable you to do it.”** So what is that commission?

III. Jesus' commission to us [READ vv. 19-20a]

The Great Commission has four elements. It speaks of: (1) Going; (2) Making disciples of all the nations; (3) Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and (4) Teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded us. Each of these four elements has imperatival force; IOW, they are all commands. However, grammatically, the only imperative is **“make disciples.”** Going, baptizing, and teaching are all participles that flesh out what “making disciples” involves.

What is the significance of this? The significance is that the thrust or essence of Jesus' Great Commission to us is to **“make disciples.”** Going, baptizing, and teaching are the *means* by which we are to do that. Many organizations have a mission and purpose statement or a strategic plan. But how many organizations have a strategic plan of 50 words that can be summarized in two? [**“Make disciples”**] This is very typical of Jesus. In everything, he always went to the heart of the matter. That is exactly what he is doing here in his commission to us. So let us look at these four elements:

First, Going. **Ps 2:6-8** had prophesied a restored Israel, with the Messianic King enthroned on Mount Zion, as God's “Son,” with the nations and the **“ends of the earth”** given to him as his possession. In **Psalm 2**, the nations are pictured as *coming to Zion* in order to experience God's presence and blessings. What Jesus has done in the Great Commission is to turn that on its head. *We* are to go *to* the nations. Jesus said the same thing in **Acts 1:8** when he said [READ].

This is important for us as individuals and as a congregation. Many people think, **“I wish my friend, or neighbor, or co-worker would come to church and hear the Word of God.”** The fact is, they never will—unless you invite them. And they don't have to wait to come to church to hear the Word of God. Jesus commissioned you (and me) to know the gospel, relate our stories, and tell them about Jesus. To *GO* and show Jesus to our friends, neighbors, and co-workers—and what it might mean for their lives to follow him—is what Jesus has commissioned us to do. *We cannot* remain passive. To be sent is *basic* to our Christian identity.

Second, after telling us to “Go,” Jesus then said we are to **“make disciples of all the nations.”** As I mentioned earlier, this is the heart of the Great Commission. First, a word about the “nations.” The Greek word here is *ethnē*. It is used here in its general sense of “multitudes” or “peoples.” That is clear from the context as well as the use of the word “all” before nations. IOW, Jesus is commissioning us, his people, to go to everyone—because as **Rev 5:9** reminds us, Christ has **“purchased for God with his blood people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.”**

We are to make “disciples”; so what is a “disciple”? A “disciple” typically means a student or learner. But in the NT it means more than that. It is someone who accepts the instruction given to him or her and makes it his rule of conduct, like one who attaches himself to a master—like a master carpenter—and by teaching, Q&A, observation, and practice, becomes just like the master.

Being a disciple is rational, missional, and relational. What do I mean? As disciples, we need to know the gospel and its implications for our lives (that is the rational part). The mission given to us by Jesus to “make disciples” of all the nations is the missional part. We are to communicate the gospel by word and deed within everyday relationships of love so as to make new disciples (that is the relational part).

To put it another way, discipling is an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside others in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another to come to Christ and to grow to maturity in Christ. This includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well. We need to understand that doing this is part and parcel of our relationship with Jesus himself—since how can we say we love him, how can we call him our “Lord” if we do not do the very thing he specifically commissioned us to do?

¶ 122 of the Methodist Book of Discipline defines “making disciples” this way: “We make disciples as we:

- Proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
- [Second] Lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
- [Third] Nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
- [Fourth] Send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel.

In short, making disciples involves all aspects of our lives. We are to be engaged with people. We are to take the initiative. We are to live intentional lives, with Jesus at the center. And it applies to us as individuals and as a corporate body.

Third, Jesus then spoke of “baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The act of baptism marks the transition of a person’s being outside the Christian community to being within it. Baptism is symbolic on many levels:

- Baptism expresses an individual’s identification and union with Christ;
- Baptism symbolizes the death of our old life and rising to our new life in Christ;
- Baptism symbolizes repentance and forgiveness of sins; the use of water signifies cleansing and regeneration;
- Baptism symbolizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit, his filling and empowering work;
- Baptism expresses a person’s identification with the church; it initiates the person into the church, and symbolizes the union believers have with one another;
- Baptism also expresses something about the nature of the church; since everyone goes through the same act of baptism, baptism symbolizes a community where racial, economic, and sexual divisions are dissolved.

What we are seeing is that Jesus’ Great Commission is far more fundamental than we may think. We are to go to all people—the one’s we like, the one’s we don’t like; those who are like us, those who aren’t. We are to make disciples. IOW, we are to work with people in loving relationships—teaching, modeling, and equipping them—until we and they become just like Jesus. That is reinforced by Jesus’ mention of baptism, because baptism signifies that the gospel involves a radical transformation of our lives. It affects us inside and out. We go from death to life. We are regenerated, cleansed, and filled with the HS. We have a new power for living. And we are adopted into a new family, the church

Fourth, Jesus concluded his commission by saying, “Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” Many people, when they hear the term the “Great Commission,” simply think of evangelism—getting people to say the so-called “sinner’s prayer.” That’s not it at all; or, rather, that is simply the first step. Jesus did *not* say, “Go and make converts of all the nations.” He said, “Go and make *disciples* of all the nations.”

That is why we need to know the gospel and its implications for our lives. Understanding the gospel results in nothing less than radical change, in all spheres of life, as when a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. One writer put it like this, “It is not merely a change in religious sentiments but a radical reorientation of a person’s life. . . . This transformation begins on the inside, at the level of beliefs and values, and moves outward to embrace behavior and its consequences. The gospel is so much more than evangelism. Many Christians have accepted a diluted, pietistic version of Christ’s command to disciple all nations; but the gospel is God’s total response to man’s total need.” (Miller 1998: 73)

When Jesus says we are to “teach them to observe all that I commanded you,” he is simply repeating what he said many times in the NT. For example, in **Matt 7:21**, in talking about the judgment, Jesus said, **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who *does* the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”** And in concluding his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said **“everyone who hears these words of Mine and *acts on them*, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock,”** but **“everyone who hears these words of Mine and *does not act on them*, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.”**

How we live—what we do—reveals what we really believe. In **Matthew 15** Jesus talked about people who honor him with their lips but do not do what he says. He said, **“THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME and IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME.”** This is serious stuff. It relates directly to Jesus’ Great Commission to us, where he tells us the most important things we are to do, which is summarized in just two words—**“Make disciples.”** And he tells us how to do it. We are to **“Go”** to **“the nations, the multitude, the people,”** we are to **“baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,”** and we are to **“teach them to observe everything he has commanded us.”**

If we just sit at home—if we *don’t* go to people (our friends, neighbors, co-workers)—do you think we are fulfilling the Great Commission? If we just live complacent lives, happy with our lot, do you think we are doing what Jesus said we should do? Then why do we tend to be so passive and complacent? Well, we’re nervous. We’re afraid of what people may think.

We don’t have to be nervous or afraid, because we don’t have to do any of this on our own. He is with us. And he has equipped and enabled us with his heart, his mind, his Spirit, his Word, and our brothers and sisters in his body, the church. What more could we ask? So what are we doing about it? Because if we are *not* doing it, can we really say that we love Jesus, that he is Number 1 in our lives?

Those are questions we need to seriously consider. The reason is that the difference between not knowing Jesus versus knowing him as our Lord and having him as Number 1 in our lives—is the difference between life and death. It is the most important thing in the world.

Jesus ended his Great Commission by saying, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” That concluding phrase is important. In his commission to us, he has told us that he has *all authority*. Because of that we are to go to *all the nations*. We are to teach them to obey *all his commandments*. And now he is saying that we are to do this—and he is enabling us to do this—because he is with us *all the time*. And not just with us but *in* us. And not just in us but *actively* in us. Remember **Phil 2:12-13**, **“it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”**

Jesus seeks the obedience of his disciples, however hesitating we might be. He is reassuring us, **“Don’t be afraid; don’t be hesitating; I’m with you; I’m IN you; I have enabled and empowered you; this is the most important thing in life; and as you do what I am telling you to do, I will show you wonderful things.”**

And there is one more thing. We are not responsible for the results. God is. The results are up to him. So we don’t have to worry about the results. We can simply go out and do what he has commissioned and empowered us to do without any worries about **“suppose I screw this up.”** We can do what he has told us to do with complete peace of mind.

So let’s look at:

IV. How we can apply this and implications of this for our lives

As we talk about applying the Great Commission and its implications for our lives, I want to address the church as a corporate body first and then address us as individuals.

So let us talk about the church’s applying the Great Commission as a corporate body. Chuck Colson once said, **“In a healthy church, worship leads to evangelism, which leads to discipleship. . . . Evangelism should always be designed to bring the convert into the local church, where the work of discipleship can be done.”** Another writer picked up on that. He says, **“If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples. . . . We need to understand the church as the *effect* of discipleship and not the cause. If you set out to build the church, there is no guarantee you will make disciples. It is far more likely that you will create consumers who depend on the spiritual services that religious professionals provide.”** (Breen 2011: 11)

The basis of discipleship is the gospel. The gospel is not just the ABCs of our faith. Instead, the gospel applies to, and has implications for, *all* areas of life. It has implications for what we do with the environment, what we do with our time, our money, our relationships—everything. We talk about much of this in our ECLEA book *Biblical Stewardship*.

The first thing we need to know as a church is that no one will become a mature disciple of Christ by only coming to church on Sundays. Disciples are not created accidentally. Discipleship is an intentional pursuit. Several studies have found that the best method for creating disciples are small discipleship groups that meet during the week, usually in people's homes. It is here that relationships are deepened. In fact, many have found that getting non-believers into Bible study and discipleship groups is a great way to expose them to the gospel, which then leads to their conversion to Christ. Most healthy, strong, dynamic, and growing churches are characterized by having small home fellowship or discipleship groups in which most of the people are active.

Several years ago, Rebecca Pippert wrote the book *Out of the Saltshaker*. It is a classic that I highly recommend. In it, she recounts many interesting stories from her own life as an evangelist with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, including her use of evangelistic Bible studies. She also lays out various conversational models to help us overcome our fear, or feelings of awkwardness, when talking to people about Jesus. Another useful resource concerning how to do evangelistic home Bible studies is the book *Your Home, A Lighthouse*, by Bob and Betty Jacks.

Secondly, any church that is serious about following Christ's Great Commission, must have a missional focus. Mission and discipleship are intimately connected. Every believer has been given one or more spiritual gifts to be used for the building up of the body of Christ and ministry to others. As people are discipled, their ministry gifts will be revealed, and they will become motivated to join existing ministries or begin new ones, both within and outside the church.

At the heart of the church's mission is the fundamental spiritual question: What does God want for us as a congregation? That should prompt a strategic question: **"What would He have us do, as individuals and as a Body?"** Only then can we ask: **"How should we structure our ministry to best accomplish this task?"** One thing you need to consider as a body is: What resources, gifts, talents, abilities, desires, and needs, do we have as a body? You need to know your people well. That will only come about by spending the time and deepening the relationships within the body.

I read of one church that wanted to become more missional. The elders met individually with each member or family and asked them a series of questions, including: **What do you enjoy doing? Where do you see God at work right now? What would you like to see God do in your life over the next 6-12 months? How can we help? How would you like to serve other people? How can we help? and How can we pray for you?**

These questions were geared toward the church's becoming more missional and becoming more engaged with its community. By doing this, the church leadership was getting to know its people better and was demonstrating that it cared about them. By doing this, the church was also bringing to light the hopes, desires, abilities, talents, and other things that probably otherwise never would have come to light. If we are to be the church God wants and designed us to be—and if we are to fulfill Christ's Great Commission—we need to be intentional and know who and what we have to work with.

The opportunities for mission are as many and varied as there are people, needs, and resources. Jesus told his disciples to begin where they were in Jerusalem, and spread out from there, ultimately to the ends of the earth. To be engaged with your local community, you need to assess what are the needs that surround us. Then we see what resources we have, and then come up with a strategy for how to get engaged with the community and meet those needs. Our ECLEA book on *The Church: Its Nature, Mission, and Purpose* discusses both discipleship and mission in some detail and has a lot of practical suggestions and examples for both.

The possibilities are staggering. Let me give you one example: Antioch Presbyterian Church of Chonju, S. Korea. When the church was founded in 1983, one of its founding principles was that it would give at least 60% of its income to missions. The church developed the nickname "Tin Can Church" because Sunday school students said it looked like a tin can lying on its side, half buried in the ground.

Some people were concerned that the missions giving goal would hinder the growth of the church. In fact, increased missions giving directly augmented church growth. The congregation now has over 4,000 members. In 2001, the congregation gave 75% of its income to mission activities. As of 2004, 248 missionaries had been sent out to 70 countries. The church also promotes evangelism, church planting, theological education, prison ministry, mercy ministries, missionary training, children and youth programs, and family counseling.

You are a smaller congregation. But that actually is an advantage in many ways. One study in the *Great Commission Research Journal* concluded, **"In terms of friendliness, making new people feel welcome, creating a sense of belonging, and offering levels of involvement in ministry leadership, smaller churches are actually superior to larger churches. These findings lend weight to a growing awareness that small churches are not just big churches that need to grow up but are a unique and potent force."**

With respect to us as individuals, as one person once said, “Everyone is in missions—you are either a goer or a sender.” I used to be a sender, IOW, I provided funds to support various ministries and missions I believe in. I still do that, but now I am primarily a goer, since I go to East Africa 5 times per year and spend most of my time when I am home researching and writing. If some of you have a heart for Africa, I would love for you to come and teach with me some time. If you’re not called to go, you should know that all donations to ECLEA are tax deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law, and 100% of all donations goes to the work of the ministry (I do not take anything for myself personally). **[The advertisement is now over—but if any of you are interested, please talk to me.]**

I am aware that you have various men’s and women’s groups that are active in various projects here in this area. That is excellent! The only thing I would add is this: You as individuals need to assess yourself—your own heart, what are you drawn to, what do you like to do, what needs stir you, what are you good at. It is God who wired you to be the way you are—and he did that for a purpose. What is that purpose?

There may be a ministry opportunity you really would like to see happen—a need that no one else seems to be doing anything about—but you have never taken the step. God is putting that need in your mind. He is causing you to see it and be concerned about it. Talk with your spouse, your pastor, mature believers whom you trust—what do they see in you? Take that step.

In my own case, the only thing I ever wanted to do when I was growing up was to be a lawyer, largely because my dad was a lawyer. And so I was for 28 years, and was reasonably successful. But after I had been practicing law for about 25 years, I grew dissatisfied. I realized that I would have to give an account of my life to God sooner rather than later, and I wondered **“Is there some way I can help build the kingdom more directly than just making money and giving it to the organizations I believe in?”** Fortunately, my dear wife said, **“If you’re dissatisfied practicing law, then quit, go to seminary, and do what you want.”** So I did, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’m very grateful. Most times when I drive past a law firm, I look up and say **“Thank you God that I’m not doing that anymore.”**

God may have something similar for you, too. It may involve a change of careers, as in my case, or it may not. But even staying exactly where you are may involve a new dynamic, a new focus, in your life. When we start taking Jesus’ words seriously, our lives become more intentional. As our lives become more intentional, there will be a new purpose and meaning in your life. You will be in a dynamic new relationship with the living Jesus. You will see things you did not see before. You will find a fulfillment in living you never experienced before.

Let me summarize: Jesus has given all of us a Great Commission—the most important commission in the world. Our lives are to be like his. We are to make disciples of others, just like he made disciples of us. Jesus was intentional. We are to be also. He redeemed his time. We must do likewise.

Mission flows from discipleship. I think that we as individuals and as a congregation need to assess ourselves, assess the needs and opportunities that confront and surround us, and thoughtfully come up with the strategies for meeting those needs and taking advantage of the opportunities God has given us.

This may mean, and probably will mean, revising what we do with our money and with our time. It may mean, and probably will mean, investing the time and effort to build new relationships with certain people. It may mean that, in some respects, your life individually—and the life of this congregation as a corporate body—may take on a new direction. But God is with you, and he has enabled you, because he has ordained this.

CONCL: Take the steps to learn what Jesus is doing in your lives individually and as a church. Talk about these things and strategize to become intentionally more discipleship and missions oriented—more engaged with your community. Make the changes and take the steps he is telling you to make. Christ *will* lead you and guide you—because this is exactly what he wants us to do and has commissioned us to do. If you do this, in a year, or two, or five you will look back and say, **“I never knew it could be this good.”**