

The Great Commission

Matthew 28:18-20

We started this series of sermons on the gospel of Matthew exactly three years ago, and this 127th sermon I have preached on this book makes this the longest series of sermons I have ever had in 38 years of preaching. This gospel is, of course, the story of Jesus, from his birth not simply to his death, but also to his resurrection and the subsequent appearances he made on earth those forty days prior to his ascension into heaven. That story, of course, continues with his ascension and the building of the church in the book of Acts, a book I have decided to study and preach upon at our Sunday morning services as soon as we finish the book of James.

So today we come to what is so often and so commonly called the Great Commission. That name is so well known and familiar that it is often capitalized, the Great Commission. A commission is a job that is assigned to be accomplished by a specific person or group. That assignment includes the idea of authority being given for that purpose, so it is not only a responsibility that you are obliged to fulfill, but with that responsibility comes the right and power to do it, the authority to accomplish the task at hand. So a commission is an official assignment by someone in power, delegating his authority to the ones who will actually carry out the assigned duty.

In this case, God is the one who issues the assignment. God is the one who rules in authority and power over the whole world, and the commission he gives to his church is the duty of bearing witness to the truth of the gospel. Evangelism we could call it, though that is really just the first step in the process of what Matthew records as “making disciples.” So we read in the book of Acts,

Acts 1:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

You shall be my witnesses! That’s the great commission of Jesus’ church. You shall be my witnesses. Luke records this great commission with these words of Jesus,

Luke 24:46 “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And you are witnesses of these things.”

I hope these words of Jesus are familiar to you. If not, I hope they become all the more familiar to you even today, for this is our purpose as a church. This is to be our ultimate vision statement, our ultimate reason for existence. “You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Or, from our text,

v.19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”

I want to begin this afternoon, though, with the previous verse, verse 18, which gives us the foundation of this great commission. Specifically, the authority by which the commission is given, and that is why I just spent that time explaining what a commission actually is. The Great Commission is not simply our task and purpose as a church, but rather it is our task and purpose as that is founded upon Jesus’ own authority. And that is vitally important.

I. JESUS' AUTHORITY IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE GREAT COMMISSION.

And so we read,

v.18 “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

All authority. God's authority. Absolute authority. God, the creator of the world, has the authority to rule and govern his creation. And the Father gives that authority to Jesus his son. So it is that,

A. Jesus has the authority of God to rule the world.

As he claims, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” That is an important aspect of what the whole Bible reveals to us. So we read of Jesus as the one...

1 Peter 3:22 “...who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.”

That fulfills a clear Old Testament promise, found in, Psalm 110:1 “The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.” 2 The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies!”

Similarly,

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.” 4 He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”

Jesus is King. He is Lord, the ruler who sits upon the throne of God. And so in Ephesians 1 we read of...

Eph. 1:19 “...the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

That's Jesus, the king who rules and reigns “ far above all principality and power and might and dominion.” And only in the age to come, but in this age, how. As I just read, again, that God the Father “put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.”

This doctrinal and theological conviction is essential to understanding this great commission, because this declaration of Jesus' authority is the foundation of that great commission. We don't have that authority or power ourselves, not even as the church. That authority comes from the declaration of King Jesus. And the words are as clear as they could possibly be. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

Note then the end of this great commission, the very end of Matthew's entire gospel. The words refer to this same authority, though instead of that authority being defined and declared, it is exemplified. In other words, Jesus makes a promise, to us, to his church, his covenant people on earth. And the promise is so necessary and so encouraging,

v.20 “..and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

B. Jesus has promised to be present with his church on earth throughout this entire age.

Please understand, that is more than merely a personal encouragement, such as what we read in,

Heb. 13:5 “For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we may boldly say: “The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”

This promise in Matthew 28 is more even than that, more comprehensive than that. This is Jesus’ promise to his church, and his promise to be with his church is really the same as his promise to build his church. So the promise of Matthew 28:20 would then be the same as Jesus’ promise in,

Mat. 16:18 “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The gates of hell will not prevail against the church! The gates of hell, and the ruler of hell, will not succeed against the church, because Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth! Satan will not be victorious, he will not succeed. He will not win the great cosmic war between himself and God the creator. Jesus will build his church, and it is just that authoritative encouragement that he gives his disciples in this great commission. “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

In Ephesians 2 Paul speaks of that great enemy, “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.” That ultimate ruler of evil will not succeed. And in Ephesians 6 he declares that,

Eph. 6:12 “...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but

against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

But those rulers of the darkness of this age shall not succeed. God will build his church. “And lo, [Jesus says,] I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” That’s the foundation of the Great Commission. And then the focus.

v.19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...”

II. THE WHOLE WORLD IS THE FOCUS OF THE GREAT COMMISSION.

In the Old Testament, the people of God were identified by one nation, the nation of Israel. All the other nations were called the Gentiles, or simply “the nations.” There was Israel, the nation of God’s people, and there were all the other nations. Those other nations were always invited to join Israel, there was always what we could rightly call an evangelistic emphasis even in the Old Testament, but all the nations had to join the one nation of Israel. Now, in the New Covenant, the church goes to all the nations, and the people of God, the covenant people of God, are not defined by citizenship in any one particular nation. Rather, the church now goes to all the nations! That is the essence of the Great Commission.

A. The church is exhorted to go to all the nations of the world.

Go therefore! As Mark puts it,

Mark 16:15 “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

So we read,

Rom. 10:8 “The word [of the gospel] is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and

believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” “Whoever” refers to all the nations, anyone, anywhere, who calls on the name of the Lord. So the great commission of the church is to go to them with that gospel.

Gal. 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

So go and make disciples of all the nations! That is our responsibility. That is our commission. That is the work God has given us to do on this earth. And that has to be our vision and purpose as a church, not just the sustenance and encouragement of one another within our own congregation. That is vital, to be sure, but together, we aren’t called by God simply to establish our own congregation and enjoy fellowship among our own people. We are called to go to all the nations.

In practical terms, that is why we are committed and involved in the work of world missions, even as difficult as that has proven to be over the past decade or two. That is why the OPC, from its very humble beginnings in the midst of the great depression, has been committed as a denomination to raising up foreign missionaries. That’s why we go to places like the rural village of Nakaale, in the province of Karamoja, Uganda. That’s why we

have a missionary in the poverty stricken nations of Haiti and the war torn nation of Ukraine. That’s why we go to China, and even, in years past, a physical presence in the nation of North Korea. That’s why we are in Japan, and in Quebec, Canada. And Uruguay. That’s why we spend more than 10% of our own church budget in the work of missions around the world. Because Jesus has given us this great commission, and we must be satisfied with nothing less than doing what he exhorts us to do, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

In that context, let me emphasize one further, particular point, going back to the parallel passage in Mark’s gospel.

B. The church is the means by which the gospel will go to all the nations of the world.

The church is given this commission, not a para-church group, not some Christian organization that might well be doing good work for the kingdom of Jesus. The church is given this commission, the church is given this responsibility, and the church is given this authority!

Mark 16:15 “And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

The church is to preach the gospel to every creature. The church is to go into all the world. Because Jesus has given his promise to that church, with the promised reward, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” And going back to Matthew 16,

Mat. 16:18 “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,

and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Do you see how important this great commission is? The church exercises on earth the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The church uses the keys of the gospel to open the door of heaven itself. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” So go, Jesus says. Go to all the nations of the world. Go and preach the gospel to every creature. We can and must do no less. And that must be the great purpose of our existence as a church here on earth.

Going back to Matthew 28, note with me something that Matthew identifies so clearly, namely the purpose of the Great Commission. What is our purpose is going to the nations? What is our purpose in preaching the gospel to all the nations, to every creature? Matthew’s answer is this, making disciples.

III. MAKING DISCIPLES IS THE PURPOSE OF THE GREAT COMMISSION.

v.19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...”

A disciple is a learner, a pupil, a student given to follow the teacher closely, as an imitator. So the goal of the gospel, the goal and purpose of going to all the nations and to every creature is to be the instrument by which God makes them disciples, followers of Jesus. That is the purpose of salvation, not simply to provide fire insurance, as we might lightly describe it, not merely to provide the needed escape from the condemnation of hell. But more than that, to make us followers of Jesus, disciples. That is, to be quite literal, the meaning of the label Christian. Little Christs, disciples. That’s who we are to be. And that begins with conversion, what we usually simply call salvation, getting saved, being saved. Conversion is a more accurate description, referring to the change of heart and soul that defines true salvation. Jesus

uses the phrase born again. Or made alive. And that must come first. A profession of faith. A personal declaration of faith and trust in Jesus. As I read earlier,

Rom. 10:8 “The word [of the gospel] is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation...13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

That’s conversion...calling on the name of the Lord. Even more accurately, the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart that enables you to call upon the name of the Lord. That’s really the meaning of being born again. The word we often use well in this context is regeneration. God’s work to give you a new heart. To make you alive.

Tit. 3:4 “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

He saved us! “...through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus refers to that work of salvation by its outward sign, the sign of washing, namely baptism. That’s why there is the reference to baptism in verse 19, not because some outward ceremony will save anyone by itself, but that that outward ceremony represents the very work of God in the conversion of those once were dead in their sin but now made alive!

A. Conversion is symbolized by baptism.

So we baptize those who trust in Jesus. We administer the outward sign of the new covenant, a sign of the washing of regeneration, a sign by which we are marked and identified as the covenant people of God. And that true mark of our identify as God's people must include a proper reference to the one true God, a God who exists and reveals himself in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So Christian baptism, the sign of the new covenant, is the sign of water being poured out and sprinkled upon those who are then identified as the covenant people of God. And that sign is given "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," because that is who God is!

So go to all the nations; go to every creature, and preach the gospel. With this great hope and promise as recorded in,

Acts 13:48 "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed."

How do we know whom God has appointed, ordained to eternal life? How do we know whom God predestined unto life? That's easy? They are the ones who believe! And the means by which the come to believe is the faithfulness of the church going to every creature to preach the gospel.

But conversion, by itself, isn't enough. And Jesus doesn't use the language in the great commission of making converts. He uses the language of making disciples. Thus the familiar words, v.19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations."

Make disciples. Make followers of Jesus. And to give that a very specific definition and explanation, we read,

v.20 "...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you."

So the goal is not simply evangelism, if I can say it that way. The goal is not just to preach the simple declaration of the gospel by which unbelievers are saved. Rather, the goal of the Great Commission, the goal of the church, is to teach those converts such that they become followers of Jesus, imitators of Jesus. Teach them to observe, to obey, all that Jesus has commanded. So it is that,

B. Conversion is demonstrated by faithful obedience.

Often, the ministry of the church fails because it only seeks the barest essentials of conversation. The focus is only upon getting saved. And while that is a necessary focus, it is only the first step, the means to an end. And the end, the purpose, of the evangelistic declaration of the church, proclaiming the gospel, must be the demonstration of faithful obedience in life. In other words, making disciples.

That's why my own preaching is not limited to the bare invitation of the gospel. We err if we don't emphasize sufficiently that call to faith and repentance, to call upon the name of Jesus and to trust him for salvation. But again, that's just the first step in the responsibility given to us in this Great Commission. As Paul would speak of his own ministry,

Acts 20:27 "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God."

So that is our task. That is our purpose. That is our commission, the very reason for our existence as a church. That we would go to every nation, to every creature, in order to make disciples of Jesus. That, of course, begins right here in this congregation, in this church. And as disciples, Jesus would say to us what he said to those first apostles in Jerusalem,

Acts 1:8 "...you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."