

The Great Commission

Matthew 28:11-20

Mark Vroegop

11 While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. 12 And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers 13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:11-20)

Today we come to the last remaining text in our study of Matthew, and it has been quite a journey. We began our journey over two years ago on April 19, 2009, and this series has included over 70 sermons as we've examined this glorious gospel. Next week I'm going preach an overview of the entire book so that you will not miss the forest for the trees, and I'll also tell you next week where we're headed over the Summer and into the Fall.

Over the last few weeks we've beheld the passion of Jesus as he was betrayed, beaten, crucified and buried. Last Sunday we celebrated (along with 5,050 people!) the glorious moment of the resurrection of Jesus. We heard the angel say, "I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said..." (Matt 28:5-6). And we learned that the resurrection changed everything.

This morning's text, the final passage in Matthew, shows us very clearly the implications of this radical change. The Gospel of Matthew ends with a charge or a command or a mission that the resurrected Christ gives to his disciples. His mission has been accomplished; theirs is just beginning. Matthew makes this the last thought that he gives to his readers because his aim has not been to simply chronicle the life of Jesus; his purpose has been to show people that Jesus really was the Messiah whose mission was to bring the kingdom of God to the world. Therefore, his gospel ends with a clear sense that there is something more to do, another chapter that needs to be written, that this is only the beginning of the story.

Matthew ends his gospel with what is often called the Great Commission – the mission to make disciples of all nations. From a small band of followers, Christianity would spread around the globe. The disciples began a mission that we are a part of fulfilling today – an important, final charge given by Jesus to those who believe in him.

Let's look at this mission given by Jesus so that we can be reminded and motivated to action in discovering what our mission is in this Great Commission.

1) Unstoppable Mission

Matthew sets up the closing paragraph by telling us about the way in which the guards at the tomb and the religious leaders colluded together to cover-up the resurrection of Jesus. This was, after all, their worst fears – that Jesus would be perceived (let alone really have done it!) as rising from the dead. Let's read what happened:

11 While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. 12 And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers 13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day (Matt 28:11-15).

It really is a remarkable moment because the soldiers would be admitting to dereliction of duty since they would say that they were sleeping. They failed in their mission, and their cover-up would have been quite costly. So it must have been worth their while to concoct this story.

No doubt Matthew included this section here because of the circulation of this story that Jesus's body had been stolen by his disciples, but there is also something more to see here beyond just an explanation for an alternative story regarding the resurrection.

It is remarkable to see the numerous ironies here, and it shows us, once again, that the mission of God is unstoppable. People who don't intend to be a part of God's plan and even those who are trying to stop his plan become unwitting and ironic figures in the working out of his divine drama. Notice the following:

- The guards, who were supposed to be preventing the resurrection of Jesus, become the first witnesses to the religious rulers. They were witnesses whether they wanted to or not.
- The soldiers were put in position to be a form of security; now they are the greatest security risk for the religious rulers. They have to be kept quiet.
- The religious leaders worked very hard to prevent a situation where the disciples could steal the body of Jesus. Yet this is the very story that they tell.

- The religious leaders who were so scrupulous about “blood money” from Judas are now willing to pay a large sum of money to cover-up the resurrection.
- It was but two days ago that in front of Pilate they called Jesus a deceiver, and now they are knowingly and willingly deceiving the people.

No matter what they did, God was always ahead of them, and in some cases God was directly using their actions – even those done in spite – to accomplish his will and purposes. At every turn and with every action, they were playing right into the hands of sovereign God. And in some cases when they thought they were successful, they were actually failing. When they thought they had won, they had no idea that God was working out his plan through them. Do you know how frustrating this must have been for them?

Jesus had said that this would be the case. He said, “...I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mark 16:18). What was he saying? He is identifying that God has a plan and a mission – to build his church. And nothing is going to stand in the way of that mission. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, tells the large crowd the same message:

22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. 24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it (Acts 2:22-24).

And even though the religious rulers threatened the disciples and imprisoned them, the gospel still spread. The effect was that even priests were converted.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

This is what happens when people really come to understand what the gospel is all about. It was Tertullian (160 – 220 AD) who said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” In other words, the gospel is unstoppable. The reason is because God is orchestrating everything, and when you know this, it gives you incredible freedom. Two weeks ago, our pastoral staff attended The Gospel Coalition Conference, and we heard Matt Chandler explain how this worked for the apostle Paul.¹ I transcribed a section of his sermon on my blog:²

You’ll never meet a man that is as free as Paul is; you can’t touch him! If you tell him, “We’re going to kill you.” Paul would say, “All right, it is time to go home!” If you say, “We’re going to let you live.” He would say, “Alright, to live is Christ!” “Okay, we are going to beat you.” Paul would

¹ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/youth>

² <http://www.ignitingapassion.blogspot.com/>

reply, "You know how it is...that is sharing in the sufferings of Christ; I welcome that." If you threaten him, "We'll put you in prison." Paul would say, "I'll convert your guards and most of your prisoners."

Do you see the point? God is in control. His followers are free! The mission of the gospel is unstoppable. Do you know that means?

It means that if today you are trying to oppose God, it is a really bad idea. If you are playing fast and loose with what you know to be God's plan for your life, rest assured that has never worked, and it won't work for you either. Secondly this means that when life gets really dark – don't panic. Biblical history is filled with examples of how God came through when everyone thought that all hope was lost. Third, always keep in mind that God is working out his plan, and we are just a part of it. You may not fully see what is going on, but you can always rest assured that God's mission is unstoppable. Finally, always keep in mind that God is doing things that you do not see. I think that we will be very surprised when we get to heaven at the number of ways that God was at work in areas that we thought were completely closed and impossible.

2) The Great Commission

The amazing thing about God's mission in the world is that he uses the followers of his Son to accomplish his purposes and his plan. Therefore, Jesus gives the disciples the Great Commission which is their charge to make disciples of all nations.

What is remarkable about the ending of the Gospel of Matthew is the strong presence of four "all's" in just three verses.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "**All** authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of **all** nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe **all** that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you **always**, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:16-20) (emphasis mine).

Matthew clearly wants us to see something: The victorious Christ calls his disciples to a global mission and promises his continued presence. We see that **universal Lordship creates a universal mission with universal help**.³ In other words, King Jesus has won; go spread his kingdom!

³ David Turner, Matthew - Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 689.

Universal Lordship

Verse 16 tells us that the disciples went to a mountain in Galilee as they were instructed, and it was there that they encountered Jesus. It is important to note here that Matthew records no other appearances of Jesus (i.e., Upper Room – John 20:19-23, Thomas – John 20:24-29, Emmaus Road – Luke 24:13-35) and that this appearance happens on a mountain. In the Old Testament and the New Testament, important and authoritative moments happen on mountains. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 19), part of Jesus’s temptation (Matt 4:8), The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1), the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1), the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:3), and the Gethsemane Prayer (Matt 26:30ff) all take place on a mountain. This location, like all the others, is a fitting setting for the significance of the moment.

Jesus makes a very important statement in verse 18: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me...” Everything that follows in verses 19-20 are based upon this claim. What is he saying?

The word authority carries a wide range of meaning which includes power, right, freedom and ability. In the context here, it is best thought of as “to rule.” The usage is more focused on the scope of the authority. In other words, Jesus doesn’t have more power in this moment than before he was crucified; he was and is the Son of God. What is different is the declaration of victory on earth and in heaven. The Father has given him this authority to him (see 1 Cor 15:27-28) through the conquering of death, and now Jesus becomes the one through who all of God’s authority is mediated. He becomes the mediatorial King, and it marks a radical turning point in redemptive history.⁴

9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11).

Jesus is the prophet who declares the word of God, the priest who makes sacrifice for sins, and the King who mediates God’s rule. He is prophet, priest, and king. He is Lord. This is what led Abraham Kuyper to say, “There is not one square inch on planet earth over which the risen Christ does not declare – MINE!” He has **all** authority in heaven and on earth. And while those two realms are still distinct and separated, the battle that has set the stage for the union of God with mankind has been won.

Therefore, everything falls under the banner of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you understand and love and believe in the Lordship of Christ, it serves as a great motivator for what comes next.

⁴ D.A. Carson, Matthew – Expositors Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervans Publishing, 1984), 595.

Universal Mission

With the Lordship of Christ as the foundation and the backdrop, Jesus gives his disciples the charge that we, as a church family in 2011, are still living out. This mission involves multiple elements but one main thrust.

Make Disciples - The center of the Great Commission is the phrase "make disciples." It is the only word or phrase that is a command, and it is the main thrust. The other words – "Go", "baptizing", "teaching" – are also important, but they serve the primary command to "make disciples." What does this mean?

To make disciples means that Jesus has charged his followers with the task of replicating themselves. In other words, the mission is not just a teaching mission; it is not just a converting mission; it is not just a baptizing mission. The Great Commission is a discipleship mission where teaching and truth produce changed people. It is a calling to be in the process of producing people who are followers of Jesus. Discipleship is not a higher-level of spiritual maturity or growth; it is the starting point of Christianity. In this regard, discipleship **is** Christianity. The mission is to make people who are radically committed followers of Jesus.

The call of Jesus is to make disciples. They are to do what Jesus has done to them. Therefore, disciple-making or follower-producing is the central mission of the church. What does that look like?

Baptizing and Teaching To Observe– Discipleship is further fleshed out with the two other participles of baptizing and teaching. Baptism is so closely linked to discipleship in the Bible, that you really cannot have one without the other. It is a sacred act whereby a person publically identifies with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a dynamic symbol that represents what happened with the person invited Christ to be his or her Savior. And it is also an initiation into a life of discipleship. Not unlike vows at a wedding or a ring worn by a married person, baptism powerfully communicates the importance and the depth of one's commitment to Christ.

Central to this discipleship/baptism context is the calling to teach people what Jesus said. But notice that the teaching is not just focused on the accumulation of content; learning alone is not the goal. It is "teaching to observe all that I have commanded you" (v 20). In other words, true discipleship is teaching people how to obey. It is not enough to get information disseminated; truth has to impact a person's life. The goal is life transformation.

Do you see the picture that Jesus gives us here about the mission of the church and discipleship? It would be wise for us to note again that 1) discipleship is THE mission of the church because it is THE definition of what it means to be a Christian, 2) baptism is a vital part of this process, and 3) our goal is truth with impact, not just truth for truth sake.

Go...all nations - Jesus links this discipleship calling to a universal scope. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." It is no coincidence that he gave this charge to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, a region dominated by Gentiles. Further, it is no coincidence that Matthew starts his gospel with a reference to the two most promise-loaded names in the Bible: "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." An eternal king was promised through David, and from Abraham was promised an heir who would be blessing to all the nations (Gen 12:3). The disciples and us are given a mission that is to be universal in who it reaches. In other words, the missional footing of the disciples should be on going everywhere and anywhere where there are people. Their disciple-making efforts should not become home-grown or internally or nationally limited. The leaning of their lives is on the increasing expansion of God's kingdom in any arena that does not have the light of the Gospel.

"Go" is not just an activity; it is a mind-set and a philosophy. It means that we never treat the Gospel as if it were meant just for us – to make us happy, whole, and complete. Certainly the Gospel does all of that, but it was meant to be spread, to be given away.

Therefore, it seems that every single follower of Jesus has a disciple-making, gospel-spreading duty. It means that our orientation in life has to be very different, especially for life in the United States and particularly in Northern Indianapolis. We have to be careful to remember that our mission from Jesus is not just to assimilate into the culture, blend in, act like, be like, spend like, and look like everyone else. Our mission is to go anywhere the gospel is not and especially where it's never been heard.

This is something that we have to work on personally and something that we have to work on as a church. We need to continually strive to have a spread-the-gospel, give-it-away, build-God's-kingdom, reach-the-unreached mindset in the midst of a culture that pulls us the other way.

That is one reason why we take an entire month in October to talk about Missions, and why we are working in the Brookside neighborhood. This is why we do SERVE|11 in May. I love the fact that last year over 40% of our budget was spent on people and ministry outside of what happens at 96th and Towne. Let me give you a few other things that I love:

- I love the fact that we gave a total of \$1.8 million dollars to missions last year
- I love the fact that even though you were giving sacrificially to a new facility, you still gave over \$500,000 in the Christmas offering
- I love the fact that we helped send \$52,000 worth of food to people in Birmingham, Alabama through the Midwest Food Bank on Saturday
- I love the fact that in the last 5 years we've had 16 people head to the mission field (people like the DeBruins, Henneys, Meyers, Doddridges, and Sanders to name a few)
- I love the fact that we have 10 people preparing behind them to head to the mission field

- I love the fact that on top of our 55 missionaries and our 8 global partners, we have 55 people who are attending a Journey in Missions class, learning how to fulfill the Great Commission

And let me tell you I can't wait for the day – and I would even issue this challenge today. I can't wait for the day that we are able to have a Christmas offering top 1 million dollars. I'd love to see us do that in the next 5 years.

This Great Commission-motivated, externally-focused mindset is risky. It means you live on less so you can give. It means you invite people over who are different than you. It means you serve in an area of the city that isn't familiar. It means you go to some place that is far away. It means that sometimes you go to places that people do want you there. And that is why you need the last "universal" piece of the puzzle.

Universal Help

If you really understand the Gospel, if you really understand the mission of the church, and if you really understand the nature of our culture then you know why you need what comes next: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (v 20).

Jesus knows what we are like. Even on the mountain in Galilee there were some who were doubting (v 17). He knows that we are weak and prone to fear. That's why he came and lived among us! And that is why he gave us this promise. The promise here is that he will be with us always. The implication of this is not just a future hope but a present reality. Every step of the way, every risky step, every moment when you feel uncomfortable and every situation where you feel stretched – Jesus is there. And the promise is that his empowering presence can overcome our weakness.⁵

So Matthew ends his glorious gospel not with another command but a promise. A promise given to those who understand that God's mission is unstoppable, Jesus's Lordship is universal and the message has to go global.

This mission – The Great Commission – is for all of us. It is our mission given to us personally by Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham – The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The final chapter of Matthew is still being written, and we are a part of it! So if you love the Lordship of Jesus – Go! And when you are scared remember: You are never alone!

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⁵ Turner, 691.