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Matthew 28:18-20 (read vv.16-20) “The Great Commission”

Intro. The longer I live the more I realize that people do indeed need the Lord. Apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, the only hope they have of eternal life is a false hope. Without Jesus Christ they are condemned by their sin, and they are slaves to sin. Apart from Christ people are much more prone to immorality, drug abuse, hatred, violence, and crime. Their lives tend to become broken and fragmented. Yet people are incurably religious. Most people who do not embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ will embrace some other religion, and become enslaved in spiritual darkness. Billions are enslaved by Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or even the occult.

Yet Jesus came to save us from our sin and its consequences. He died on the cross to satisfy God’s holy wrath against sin. He rose victoriously from the grave. He is alive to save souls by His cross, by His indwelling Spirit, and by His Word. And now in our text today He stands ready to send out His disciples to take His saving message to the world. Somewhere in Galilee, Jesus gathered a large number of His disciples, and spoke unto them this Great Commission. He did not pay so great a price just to save one generation of Jews. He died for the whole world, and He wants His Gospel to reach all people of every generation. God is love and He is not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

You and I have a role in fulfilling this Great Commission of our Lord. This is the Great Commission, not the Great Suggestion. And this mission that He gave to the early church applies to the modern church, for in v.20 Christ promised to be with His missionary followers until the end of the age. So until Jesus returns to earth, the Great Commission is still in force. Our marching orders are the same as theirs. Let us make sure that we do not forget the primary purpose of the Church.

Now this morning I want to share with you what we must know and do to obey the Great Commission of our Lord found here in the closing verses of Matthew’s Gospel. First of all, we must:

I. MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS

The main command in v.19 according to the Greek text is, “make disciples of all the nations.” It is not enough to get people to make a decision & pray a prayer. We have not completed the task until we give all people everywhere the opportunity to become disciples of Jesus Christ. If you study the book of Acts, the primary word that is used to describe Christians is the word “disciples.” In Jesus’ day, discipleship was not solely a religious concept. It was even used in the business world to describe an apprentice. A disciple would attach himself to an instructor, and learn from him and even live with him. He learned, not simply by listening, but also by doing. So a disciple is a pupil, a learner.

Even so, we need to help people become learners and followers of Jesus Christ. Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? Are you leading others to become disciples of Christ? Well Jesus gives detailed instructions regarding what we must do to make disciples.

A. We Must Go to Them - Remember, Jesus said that we are to make disciples “of all nations.” They were not to go just to the Jews scattered among the Gentiles, but to the Gentiles themselves in every land.¹ So it was fitting that in “Galilee of the Gentiles,” that outlying and despised province, He should proclaim the widening of this kingdom from Israel to all nations.

This means, of course, that we must go to the nations. As someone has said, “The first work of the whole church is to give the gospel to the whole world.”

Once there was a man who sat down to read a stack of papers waiting for his perusal. One of the pieces of mail was a newsletter entitled, “The Report of the Paris Missionary Society.” In the humble newsletter was an article describing needs in the Congo of Africa. This man was multi-talented. He had doctoral degrees in theology, literature, and music. He was a great organist. He was even a medical doctor. Yet he decided to give the rest of his life to the Congo. Some thought him foolish to do so. He gave up his status to go to that far field. Many of you will recognize his name: Albert Schweitzer.²

This command to go still applies today. There are many nations & people groups that have largely been untouched by the Gospel. By in large the nations will not come to us; we must go to them. We must send out missionaries. The greatest need is for people to surrender to long-term missionary service. If you are not called to do that, then consider short-term missionary service. Several opportunities are posted on our bulletin board. Our church will help pay your way if you are a member in good standing. Will you go? We also need to support our missionaries through prayer and financial support. Next month we will receive an offering for our North American missionaries. Will you pray and give, so they can go?

Also, at home there is an application. We must not concentrate all our efforts on just getting people to “come to church.” John 3:19-20 says, “men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light...” So we must go to bring the good news of Christ to others. Also, this is a present participle, “going” or “as you go.” As we go to work, or to school, or to other places, we should be a witness for Christ by how we live, and by what we say to others (cf. Acts 11:19-21).

B. We Must Share the Gospel with Them – This is not stated in the text, but implied. After all, the first step in become a disciple of Jesus Christ is to hear the Gospel & be saved. We need to look for opportunities to share our faith.

Missionary John Williams (1796–1839) and his bride were on a small island in the South Seas, seeking to win the natives to Christ. It wasn't an easy job converting them. But John Williams, one of our greatest missionary workers, accomplished it in an unusual way. Soon after they arrived on the island they started building a home. Working alone, with hammer and plane and saw, John Williams labored at his task, and the natives watched him. Every so often a native would offer his help. One day John found that he needed another hammer. Quickly he scribbled a note on a chip of wood. “Here,” he told a willing volunteer, “take this to Mrs. Williams, and she will give you what I want.” The native looked puzzled. Nevertheless, he carried the note to Mrs. Williams. Smiling at his consternation, she handed him a hammer. “Take this to Mr. Williams,” she said. “It is what he wants.”

¹ This is in sharp contrast with Mt. 10:5-6, where Jesus told His disciples not to go to the Gentiles, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But from the very beginning the evangelization of the world was included in the purpose of God (Gen. 12:2; Jn. 3:16; 10:16).

² J. Michael Shannon, “To Illustrate” in *Preaching* (January-February 2007), 73 [Illus.#C-1689].

The native returned—and so amazed was he at the “talking chip” that he fell prostrate before the missionary and his “miracle.” The missionary took advantage of the opportunity of the native’s interest in the “talking chip.” “You, too, can hear the talking chip,” the missionary assured him. “I will teach you to listen.” And the missionary did. The native learned slowly, but he learned—and in time he was able to read from the Bible. From this humble beginning came the conversion of an entire South Sea Island to Christ!³

This means that we need to take practical steps toward sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. Most every ministry of our church needs to include a focus on reaching people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each Sunday School class should be reaching new people, especially unsaved people. We should be winning at least some to Christ. Consider this: Two out of three unsaved persons who regularly attend small group Bible study will make a commitment to Christ in the first twelve to eighteen months. So go & invite unsaved friends, co-workers, neighbors, etc. One research team was shocked to find that about seven of ten unchurched persons have never been invited to church. Most have never had anyone share their Christian faith with them.⁴ We can do better.

Now once people hear & accept the Gospel of Christ, they need to take the next step of discipleship mentioned in our text:

C. We Must Baptize Them – Discipleship is incomplete apart from baptism. Baptism is the outward expression of an inward experience. It is the breaking of old habits and the discarding of old values for new. Often it means leaving old friends, and embracing new relationships. When you are baptized you become a member of the church. The new believer needs the personal support of the family of God.

Notice that the new believer is to be baptized “in [lit. into] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The one who submits to baptism, if sincere, is proclaiming that he has broken with the world and has been brought into union with the Triune God, to whom he intends to devote his life. The three persons of the Godhead are One as indicated by the singular word “name.” So this is an evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity. But in using the name of the Triune God in baptism, the disciple is accepting baptism as a sign and seal that God the Father adopts him as his son and heir; that God the Son washes his sins away by His precious blood; and that God the Holy Spirit dwells in him, and will sanctify him. Furthermore, the use of “name” (*onoma*) here is a common one in the Septuagint and the papyri for power or authority. My authority to baptize comes from God.

Have you followed the Lord in baptism? If not, you need to take that next step in discipleship by presenting yourself for baptism today!

D. We Must Teach Them - It is not enough to win people to the Savior & baptize them; we must also teach them the Word of God. A new believer should remain in the fellowship of the church that he might be taught the truths of the faith. That’s the pattern we read about in the early church, according to Acts 2:41-47.

Notice in v.20 that Christ said that we are to teach “all things that I commanded you.” We are to teach about Jesus, and what He taught us, and commanded us. Jesus continued His teaching through His apostles. So simply put, we are commanded to teach the Bible, with special focus on the New Testament. But too many churches have gotten away from teaching &

³ Will Herman, via Sparks in *Pulpit Helps*, November 2005, page 28 [Illus.#C-1431].

⁴ *Pulpit Helps*, April 2005, pages 23, 31.

preaching the Bible. They teach the latest trends in religion. Or they teach psychology. Or they will jump on the latest ethical bandwagons. They will tell cute little stories, but neglect the faithful teaching of God's Word! Some spend all their time in praise & worship, & neglect the exposition of God's Word. God cannot bless churches and denominations that deny or neglect His Word!

Furthermore, notice that what we are to teach includes conduct, not just creed; not things merely to be believed but things to be done. The truth learned must be practiced. It must be appropriated by heart, mind, and will, so that one remains or abides in the truth. Only then is one truly Christ's disciple (Jn. 8:31). That is why Christ said that we are to teach believers to "observe" or "keep" (*tereo*) the commandments of Christ. And remember, the greatest command is to love one another. You cannot claim to be a disciple of Jesus if you do not practice love.

Teachers, this is your commission from Jesus Christ. You are not only to teach facts & doctrines, but also teach your students to obey the commands and moral teachings of Christ. They need to see obedience modeled in your life.

The teacher has an important responsibility in discipleship, but so does the student. This is why we encourage you to attend Sunday School. We teach the Bible on Wednesday nights as well. Furthermore, you need to attend the worship services. When I preach I also teach the Word of God. This Great Commission is why there is very much a teaching aspect to my preaching ministry. In fact, Eph. 4:11 can be translated in such a way as to designate the pastor as a pastor-teacher.

This overwhelming charge to "go and make disciples of all the nations" might well make each one of the Apostles ask, "And who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). The answer is, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). So in order to fulfill the Great Commission, we need to look to Jesus to enable us to fulfill the missionary mandate. Why? It is because of the great claim and great promise He gave in this text. So the second main thing I want to ask you to do is this:

II. RECOGNIZE THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Notice in v.18 that Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me...." Authority is not only power, but also the right to exercise it. What stands out the most in v.18 is the greatness of His authority. We see that in two respects. First, it is:

A. Great in Extent - Notice in v.18 that Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me...." His authority is not limited as is the authority of so many others. He has "all authority." Surely nothing is outside the power of Him who had died and conquered death. As Paul said in Phil. 2, "He became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God has highly exalted Him, and given him a name that is above every name."

B. Great in Scope - In v.18 Jesus said that His authority is over both heaven and earth. This absolutely embraces everything over which rule and dominion can be exercised. For example, He claims all authority in heaven. He is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He has authority to intercede with the Father on our behalf. The heavenly angels stand ready to obey His every command. Some are working on our behalf. He rules over the heavenly saints of God.

But Jesus Christ also claims that He has all authority on earth. That certainly extends to His Church. Paul said in Ephesians 1:22-23, "He put all things in subjection under His feet, and

gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body....” But He even has authority over the secular world. Christ has power over politics. Empires rise and fall, nations come and go, but nothing happens on earth outside of His permissive will. He can allow wars and create peace, with a view to the propagation of the Gospel. I believe that Christ has opened the doors to the former Soviet Union & Eastern Europe. His hand, no doubt, was in the great inventions over the past 400 years, so that more and more people can read and hear the gospel. In our day our missionaries can travel to far away mission fields in just a few days. Anyone in the world who has a computer and can understand English can hear me preach the Gospel through the Internet. He even has authority over storms, earthquakes, & other natural disasters. Some day He will exercise complete authority over the whole world when He comes again to rule and to reign over this world.

Ah, but this authority that Christ has is also:

C. Great in Meaning [Application] – If He does indeed have all authority as He claims, then that means that:

1. He Is the Son of God – Who is it that dares thus confidently to make this amazing claim? Who is it that utters it as if it were a simple matter of fact about which there was no question? No mere human being in His senses would ever make such a claim. So in essence Jesus is clearly claiming to be the Son of God.

I believe history bears out the fact that Jesus is the Son of God with all authority. We see the exercise of divine authority even during His lifetime. In fact, the entire Gospel of Matthew stresses the authority of Jesus Christ as King. There was authority in His teaching (7:29). He exercised authority over diseases (8:1-13). He has the authority to forgive sins (9:6). He had authority over Satan, and He delegated that authority to His apostles (10:1). And then, by His death and resurrection, Jesus defeated both death & Satan, and won for Himself all authority. The seeming defeat of Golgotha has been transformed into the triumph of Galilee. If we believe that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, we should have little trouble believing that Jesus has all authority. Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated that He has all authority through the amazing expansion of His Church, in spite of strong opposition. Within the lifetime of His disciples, around one million became followers of Jesus as Lord and Savior all over the Roman Empire. Isn't it amazing that without money or army or a national government, His followers brought the Roman Empire under the sign of the cross within 350 years? Today, there are about 1 billion followers of Jesus Christ. So great an effect must have a great cause. I believe He is the Son of God, and that He has all authority in heaven & earth. Therefore:

2. We Must Obey Him – If the winds obey His, shouldn't we? If demons obey His voice, shouldn't we? Do you accept His sovereignty over your life? Will you obey His Great Commission? Because of His absolute authority we must accept the fact that His commission is binding. Let us go, share the Gospel, baptize believers, and teach the Word of God to every creature!

Furthermore, since Christ has all authority in heaven and earth:

3. We Must Act on His Authority – Oh, let our missionary & evangelistic efforts be worthy of His great power and authority, and let our energy prove that the divine energy has not been withdrawn. The universal dominion of Christ demands a universal mission for the Church. No matter where He leads us, no matter what circumstances we face, He is in control. We have no reason to fear as we go forth to carry out our orders. The early church did not face a lost world on the basis of their own authority, but on the authority of Jesus Christ. Furthermore,

notice that our going is linked to the authority of Christ by that word “therefore.” People may say we should not try to spread our religion on other nations, but we have the highest authority in the universe telling us to go. Even if national governments prohibit us from coming in as missionaries, a higher authority has commanded us to go, so we must obey God rather than man. Our mission board is sending in missionaries under secular work visas. Like Paul, they work a job by day, and spread the gospel by night. We are commissioned to go, and go we must, for Satan holds the nations in darkness. Billions are blinded by communism, humanism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and false cults of apostate Christianity. The work of reaching the nations is still far from finished. Thousands of tribes do not even have a page or two of the Bible in their native tongue. Untold millions are still untold. Though the task is great, we have a great source of strength to fulfill the task. He has all the resources of heaven at His command. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that we do not fight for victory, but on the basis of the victory that Christ has already won. Let us obey Christ’s command to go!

Finally, we not only go based on the authority of Christ, but we need to do one more thing to fulfill the Great Commission. We must:

III. CLAIM THE PROMISE OF HIS PRESENCE

Jesus said in the last of v.20, “I, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” We are not called to go and make disciples alone. Christ Himself will go with us, for the pronoun “I,” is emphatic. Jesus did not promise to send an angel with them. No, those who were sent out on the greatest task in the world were sent with the greatest presence in the world. This verse tells me that His presence is just as real today as it was when Christ walked on this earth.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan told about an experience in his life that involved this statement. Early in his Christian life, he would read the Bible to some elderly ladies. When he read the promise of v.20, he added, “Isn’t that a wonderful promise?” One of the ladies quickly replied, “Young man, that is not a promise - it is a fact!”

Indeed, Christ will be with those who go and make disciples of all nations. So this promise means that we can:

A. Claim the Strength of His Presence – If Christ is with you, then one purpose for His presence is to give you strength for the task. Jesus said in 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.”

As most of you know I was invited to preach in Chapel at Southeastern Seminary (www.sebts.edu). I knew I would be preaching before about 20 professors with Ph.Ds, and before over 500 students. I hardly ever get nervous about preaching anymore, but I felt that I could get nervous in that setting. I asked people to pray for me, and you did. The night before I preached God burned that message into my heart. I knew He would be with me. I slept well that night, without any nervous anticipation. Then, that whole morning I continued to have faith in God that He would be with me. I had my sermon notes with me, and as the time drew near that I should preach, I had thoughts of taking my notes with me into the pulpit. But knowing that God promised to be with me, I left them on the table and preached without notes. I can testify to the fact that God strengthened me with His presence.

Will you claim the strength of the presence of Christ, and do your part of fulfill the Great Commission?

I believe we can also:

B. Claim the Safety of His Presence – The Disciples would face much opposition. The kingdom of darkness will never yield ground without a fight. But if Christ is with us, we need not fear the opposition. He will either protect us from harm, or He will strengthen us when He permits harm for His own purposes.

The apostle Paul discovered this to be true when he was seeking to establish a church in the evil city of Corinth. When the going was tough & his life was being threatened, Paul had a special visit from the Lord who said, “Be not afraid... for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10).

So claim the safety of His presence. Furthermore, based on the promise of v.20, you can:

C. Claim the Steadiness of His Presence - Jesus said in the last of v.20, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” It is not just “always,” but literally, “all the days.” You will not face a single day without the presence of God. He will never leave you or forsake you. Furthermore, Christ promised to be with His Church until the end of the age. So even after over 1900 years His promise still stands.

Finally, you can:

D. Claim the Solace of His Presence – Some days are filled with trials, troubles, and difficulties, but each day also accompanied by the assurance, “My grace is sufficient for you. I will never leave you or forsake you.” He will be with us in days of summer and days of winter, days of sunshine and days of storm, days of buoyant youth and days of old age, days of apparent failure and days of apparent prosperity. The days change, but “he is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.”

After 16 difficult years of service as a missionary in the heart of Africa, David Livingston returned to his native Scotland. During his furlough, he was asked to address the students of Glasgow University. His body was weakened and emaciated by 27 topical fevers which he had suffered and survived during his years of service. One arm hung useless as the result of being mangled by a lion. As he stood before those young students, he said, “I will tell you what sustained me amidst the toil, the hardship, and loneliness of my exile. It was Christ’s promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end.”⁵

Do you want to experience the presence of Christ in a significant way? Then obey His Great Commission. If you wish to sense the presence of Christ, the way to do so is no mere cultivation of religious emotion, or saturating your mind with religious books and thoughts, though these have their place; but on the dusty road of life doing His will, especially His will to share the Gospel.

Conclusion: So I hope you will join me in renewing my commitment to obey the Great Commission. Let us go and share the Gospel at home and abroad. And of those that we win to Christ, let us make disciples of them through baptism into the church, and by teaching the Word of God. The task may be great, but we can go forth on the authority of Christ, and based on His promise to be with us, to strengthen us for the task. Will you make a commitment to obey the Lord in some specific way? Will you come forward to present yourself for baptism? Or will you come forward to answer God’s call to be a preacher or missionary? Will you answer God’s call

⁵ *Pulpit Helps*, 4/04, page 10 [Illus.#C-855].

to go on a short-term mission trip? Will you make a commitment to be a witness of Christ wherever you go? The missionary mandate must not be neglected. Let us answer His call today!

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975); Ken Hemphill, *The Official Rule Book for the New Church Game* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 207-217; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. I (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Missionary Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971 reprint), 13-20 [25G.57]; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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