

The Great Commission

Matthew 28:16-20

INTRODUCTION

We often hear about people's famous (or infamous) last words – e.g.:

- *James M Barrie* (1860-1937), author of Peter Pan: "I can't sleep."
- *William Pitt*, 18th Century politician: "Always my country. How I love my country" OR "I think I could eat one of Vulliamy's pork pies." (only a slight difference between these two versions!!!)
- *King William II* (1087-1100) – when he was out hunting with his friend, Walter Tirel: "Shoot! Walter, in heaven's name!" (the arrow went astray and killed the king!)
- *Queen Elizabeth I* (1533-1603): "All my possessions for a moment of time."
- *Ludwig van Beethoven*: "I shall hear in Heaven"
- *William Palmer* (1824-56), an infamous poisoner, while he was mounting the gallows to be executed: "Are you sure it's safe?"
- *Henry John Temple* (1784-1865): "Die, my dear doctor! That's the last thing I shall do"

The Great Commission is NOT strictly the "famous last words" of Jesus for 2 reasons:

- 1) These are by no means last words of Christ recorded in Bible (see the book of Revelation!)
- 2) They are not even last words of Jesus in gospels – Luke records His actual last words before leaving earth in Luke 24:50-53 (Jesus ascended from Mt of Olives near Bethany, NOT Galilee)

BUT these are some of most memorable and quoted words of Christ, and are worthy of special notice. They form a key part of Christ's commission to His 11 remaining disciples, and the focal point to which all of their training over previous 3 years has been leading.

PLACE

These words were spoken on a mountain in Galilee (v16). The choice of place is significant, as Jesus rose again outside Jerusalem & first appeared to disciples around Jerusalem:

- The women visit the tomb - Mt 28:1-10, Mk 16:1-8, Lk 24:1-10, Jn 20:1
- Peter and John run to tomb – Lk 24:11&12
- The 2 on road to Emmaeus – Lk 24:13-35
- The 12 first without, then with Thomas – Jn 20:19-31

He also ascended to Heaven near Jerusalem (Lk 24:36-53, Acts 1:1-11)

Q. So why did Jesus make this trip to Galilee?

A. 2 records of what happened in Galilee explain the reason for this journey:

- 1) Peter's restoration – Jn 21:1-23
- 2) The Great Commission – Matt 28

Jesus was bringing the disciples back to the origins of their faith. This was where it all began.

In Galilee: (i) Jesus called most of disciples while preparing their nets (Matt 4)
(ii) His first miracle was at a wedding in Cana (John 2:11 – first revealed His glory)
(iii) He laid out the great truths of His Kingdom in Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7)

So, He brings them back to the beginnings to re-emphasise the basics

Do we need to be brought back to the basics of our faith to build our future foundation on them?

"GO"

It is important to point out that "go" is not the imperative verb in this sentence – in other words, the emphasis is NOT on the word go, but the word "make". The Greek phrase could well be expressed "While you are going make disciples" (Wiersbe). Why is this important? It would be wrong to suggest either:

- 1) That ALL Christians are called to go into cross-cultural mission, OR
- 2) That the great commission is only relevant for those Christians who are called to serve in full time mission or overseas.

This commission is for ALL believers, and it should be our imperative everywhere we are, wherever God has placed us. Of course it is important to maintain balance here – there are many Christians who **are** called to overseas or cross-cultural mission, and this verse has been mightily used by God to call many of them, but I want to emphasise that **we should have the same sense of purpose if we stay as we would expect if we were to stay.**

ALL Christians must seek the same assurance of being where God has called us to be.

Where is God leading you? Who is your mission field as an individual? Who is our mission field as a church?

The job of discipling people is something that is for ALL Christians, not just a chosen few.

“MAKE DISCIPLES”

This is the key aspect of the command – we must replicate! Jesus spent 3 years with His disciples training them, mentoring them, teaching them, supervising them in short term mission, and now they are ready to replicate.

Q. What does it mean to be a disciple?

A. Simply a “follower and imitator of Christ”. Term was used for Christians in New Testament.

A number of other passages show us what Jesus meant by discipleship (see Mk 8:34 – deny self and take up cross; John 8:31 – hold to His teaching; John 15:8 – fruitfulness; John 13:35 – love for one another), BUT here Christ focuses on 2 important aspects – baptism and teaching to obey.

It is worth noting that Jesus’ command is to make disciples “of all nations” – “from Belfast to Borneo”. The gospel is for all nations and cultures, and we must learn to discern what in our faith is purely cultural and what is core truth. Our faith must inform our culture rather than the other way round!

A) BAPTISM

Q. Why does Jesus not say “converting” or “bringing them to know me” or “leading them to the New Birth.”

A. There are, I suggest, two reasons:

1. Conversion / regeneration are acts of God NOT men. Jesus here is focussing on what they must do.
2. Baptism necessitates conversion, but includes much more, in particular:
 - a) Commitment to Christ – this is to be absolute. There is no room here for an empty profession in name only. Jesus must be LORD as well as Saviour – Hot Illustrations I p63 – Chicken and Pig
 - b) Identification with the community of believers. Christ is not just interested in converting people – He is building His Church (Mt 16:18). The Church was in the purpose of Christ as a home for all believers. There is to be no such thing as “individual disciples” or individual discipling programmes – each new disciple is to belong to a dynamic discipling community.

How can you be committed to this great purpose of Christ? Firstly, have you taken first step of baptism? Are you committed to membership of the community of believers? Are you committed to following Christ? Are you committed to helping others grow and mature in their walk with Him?

B) TEACHING THEM TO OBEY WHATEVER HE TAUGHT

This brings them back to Galilee a few years earlier (possibly even the same mountain) when they sat with the crowd and heard His manifesto for a new Kingdom – a community of disciples radically committed to God’s rule in their lives and to transforming their society for His glory (often known as the “Sermon on the Mount”).

Discipleship is primarily about commitment and obedience to the Master.

In our lives and our church we must give a true representation of Christ and His teachings. We must foster programmes to facilitate this (especially small groups, teaching, training, excellence in service), BUT more importantly we must develop the dynamic relationships that discipleship hinges on (requires openness, honesty, sincerity, humility, purity). At the very core is the question of our relationship to Christ.

2 KEY POINTS ABOUT US, AND 2 KEY POINTS ABOUT CHRIST

Key points about us:

1. The 11 disciples were where Jesus wanted them as He had said

An initial commitment was prepared on their part. They were already obedient to His calling, and listening to His voice. The Great Commission will mean NOTHING to us if we are hardened or closed to God’s calling.

2. Some doubted (v17)

Q. Why does the Spirit lead Matthew to include this phrase?

A. Reminder that these are ordinary men, with all the fears, doubts and uncertainties that we share. It is not an issue of their faith, but of His faithfulness. Not an issue of our ability, but of His authority.

This leads us to the key points about Christ:

1. His Authority (v18)

Matthew’s gospel speaks much of Jesus’ authority – in His teaching (7:29), healing (8:1-13), forgiving sins (9:6) and even over evil spirits and Satan (10:1). In fact, this was a central issue for the priests who asked what authority He had (21:23). Here we finally see His full authority. He has all authority as the risen Christ (cf. Eph 1:18-23, Phil 2:9-11, Col 2:9&10) and will one day take all authority to Himself when He returns (Rev 11:15).

Because He has all authority, we can have confidence in His name.

2. His Presence (v20)

Matthew also speaks several times of God's presence with us – Immanuel at His birth (1:23), in our midst (18:20), and now here. The presence of Christ empowers us – it is a great promise that He is with us!

Q. How can we live the kind of lives we ought? How can we disciple others?

A. Christ living in us by His Holy Spirit!

The key is the Holy Spirit empowering us (see Acts 1:8 – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to all the ends of the earth.”) These were His last words before He ascended to Heaven – and He could not send the Holy Spirit until He ascended (see John 16:5-16). Now He is our great High Priest (see Heb 17:3), and the Holy Spirit of God lives in us to empower us.

CONCLUSION

The key points about this commission:

- It is for ALL believers
- The imperative is to MAKE DISCIPLES
- Discipleship includes commitment to Christ, addition to the community of disciples (expressed in baptism) and obedience to the teaching of Christ
- We must examine ourselves and seek God's guidance about where our mission field is
- Discipleship is about **relationship** – to Christ and to others – without open, sincere relationships we cannot disciple others
- The truth of discipleship cannot be divorced from the truth of the filling of God's Holy Spirit – to be completely under the Lordship of Christ is to be completely filled by the Holy Spirit of God, and we cannot walk in full obedience to Christ without His empowerment