



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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### **The Great Commission**

Philippians 3:3 gives a synopsis of what constitutes a genuine believer. in contrast to the false circumcision/the false believer, Paul said this:

Philippians 3:3, “For we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

We love summary statements like this which boil down potentially complex issues into a loaded statement of truth. Such passages can be found throughout God’s word. If you want to know the essence of biblical ethics, you could read many, many books... or just turn to Micah.

Micah 6:8, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

If you wanted to know the net-net when it comes to what we ought to take away from any sermon, you need only go to 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:5, “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

If you wanted a summary statement on how we ought to think when it comes to ourselves, it would be this:

1 Timothy 1:15, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*.”

What an incredible treasure we have in the summary statements of the Bible!<sup>1</sup> They break through the static and noise of theological debate and controversy to give an easy-to-remember statement which we can bank on! And that is why Matthew 28 is so important (as it describes our Horizontal Mission as a Church). It is the eighth out of eleven resurrection appearances of Christ in which the Lord gave a charge to the Apostles as to what constitutes the essence of all Kingdom Ministry!

Think of all the books on church ministry or biblical leadership that have been written! And yet before us is the essence of what we as individual and a corporate body ought to be about! The passage is known as “The Great Commission” and, it contains the charge of our Majestic King and so serves as the day-in and day-out marching orders for everyone in Christ!

What are those marching orders? This week and next we are going to focus on that question as we consider Christ’s teaching here. We begin with the command.

Matthew 28:19, “go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

While in the English it appears that there are two commands here, in the Greek there is only one, “make disciples.” This is the main verb and the central command of vv. 19-20. As the only imperative, the call to “make disciples” constitutes what we understand as “The Great Commission”.<sup>2</sup>

And by way of note, it is important at the outset of our study that we see that Christ here is speaking formally to the Apostles whom God established to be the foundation of His church (Ephesians 2:20)<sup>3</sup>. As such, this entire passage is an exhortation as to how a church must function. Now, insofar as we are members of Christ’s church, we are under this charge. Yet as this charge rests upon the corporate body, this command will apply to the individual in ways that it might not to the formal body. We’ll talk about this as we go.

That having been said, what exactly is this “Commission”? At the outset notice that the focus of “making disciples” is NOT on *conversion* BUT on *completion*! Discipleship is NOT a matter of bringing people into the kingdom of God (though this certainly constitutes a part of discipleship), BUT of “presenting every man complete in Christ” (Colossians 1:28)!

In fact, the word for “disciple” has as its goal both believing and learning, conversion and growth in grace! To emphasize one over the other is to violate the sense of this word. And so, in its fullest sense, “discipling” encompasses NOT simply people believing in Christ for salvation OR the acquisition of knowledge that flows from conversion, BUT the daily and progressive implementation in our lives of the knowledge of salvation.

John 8:31, “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine...’”

You can’t miss it! A disciple is one who perseveres and so grows in the faith. We know that there will be many on the Last Day who profess a belief in Christ (cf. Matthew 7:22-23). Yet the reality of genuine faith is that of abiding in God’s word! Accordingly, in the Great Commission this is what Christ would have each of us pursue as a primary objective when it comes to our person and work as Christians! Recall Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, “For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.”

This is a strong statement. We might suggest many things when it came to what could be Paul’s ultimate hope, joy, and crown. Yet notice, it is the people of God growing in grace! You say, “That’s just Paul! In his typical hyperbolic approach, he most likely is over-stating the case!” Yet he wasn’t! Listen to 3 John where John professed much the same.

3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

This is the substance of the Great Commission!

Don’t miss this important focus and command when it comes to your daily service in God’s Kingdom! In a world where we tend to be so focused on ourselves, Christianity causes us to look without... to the body/bride of Christ! In this regard, you must see that while The Great Commission will at times involve evangelism, it will always involve — in the words of Paul — “presenting every man complete in Christ” (Colossians 1:28)! Toward that end, consider your role in this.

When one studies spiritual gifts, one of the things we learn is that everyone in Christ has received a spiritual gift.

1 Peter 4:10, “As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

When you were saved, you were indwelt by the Holy Spirit who engifted not just some of us, but all of us for Kingdom service! If you are in Christ, you have been given this special endowment! And why did the Holy Spirit endow you with a gift?

1 Corinthians 12:7, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

The spiritual gift you received at salvation was given that you might use it to build up the body of Christ. This then is the focus and tenor of ALL Kingdom ministry! It is NOT about us BUT equipping and encouraging others that they might grow in their walks!

For don't miss it: This is how the Lord has deigned to grow His people on to maturity! Listen to<sup>4</sup> Ephesians where Paul addresses all in Christ.

Ephesians 4:15-16, “...speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

You must see this this is the essence of the Great Commission! It is NOT the longing for salvation/conversion to come to every people group in the world (while this is a part of it, nevertheless it is only the beginning). The Great Commission is the longing and so passion for those in Christ in every people group to mature in the Lord!

With that, notice that this “disciple-making” activity — this passion to present others complete in Christ — is to be done irrespective of race, social status, gender, or creed. That is the nuance of “all nations.” While we could translate it as “all people groups” (as if often the case), there is more here. For the word used for “nation” — ἔθνος (*ethnos*) — was the typical word used of the Gentile in Christ's day who at the time — you must see — was understood by Judaism to be beyond the pale of saving grace! And that is the key here! The call of disciple-making extends NOT just to all people-groups, BUT also to the “undesirables” of our culture; that is part and parcel of the force of ἔθνος (*ethnos*) in Christ's day. And so, for example Paul wrote this:

1 Timothy 2:1-2, “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men [What does this mean? Is Paul here calling us to pick up a phone book and pray through the directory? No! That is NOT what Paul has in mind here. For notice the next verse...] for kings and all who are in authority [the king here would have been Nero!], in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.”

On account of v. 2, we understand that when Paul referenced ‘all men’ he was NOT talking every individual in the world, BUT all *types/categories* of men... as in his example, “...kings and

all who are in authority”!

This is important! If a Jew at this time prayed for the king it would NOT have been for his salvation, BUT more likely his condemnation. In Christ’s day, a Gentile king would have been viewed as one beyond the pale of saving grace! Yet such a view must NOT be held amongst God’s people. Why? Paul explains this to Timothy.

1 Timothy 2:3-4, “This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, [why?] who desires all men [we must be consistent with the context here. Based on vv. 1-2 the focus is NOT every man, BUT all *kinds* or *categories* of men... it is *All KINDS of Men* whom God desires] to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

That is the focus of the Great Commission. It is the longing for all people groups as well as the undesirables of the world NOT ONLY to come to a saving knowledge of Christ, BUT to mature in the faith unto the honor and glory of Christ!

In this regard, by way of application, I want to focus a moment on the pejorative element that accompanied “nations” in Christ’s day and so our ministry to the lowly, undesirables in the Jerusalem in which we live: the morally reprobate, the criminal, that co-worker whom you can’t stand, the one who hurt you, or betrayed you, or hurt one that you love.

### Respecting persons in Evangelism

In this regard, I am reminded of the true story of a missionary team of two men who years ago were serving in Africa in an Islamic country. As was their practice, they went daily to the local Mosque where they endeavored to engage the men who gathered there. As they neared the Mosque, they began praying that the leader and most militant Muslim of the group- Talead- would not be there (he often disrupted the missionary’s attempts at evangelism). And yet as they arrived at the Mosque, Talead was the first person they saw!

Undaunted, the missionaries began sharing the gospel with the men present. In fact, at one point, one of the missionaries began speaking about the sovereignty of Christ staring right at Talead. And to this man’s utter shock, Christ did the most amazing thing! In His sovereign Authority, the Lord softened Talead’s heart and brought him into the Kingdom of God!

You mean, Talead? The very man whom the missionaries resented, and so prayed that God would keep him from being there that day?

Family of God, who are you praying that they might NOT be present:

- At work?
- At the extended family gathering on Christmas?
- At church or the fellowship meal?

- When you go outside in your neighborhood?
- As you attend class, participate in sports, or engage in social activities?

We must understand that included in the calling that is before us today is the passion to bring Christ to ALL peoples and people groups! Accordingly, never are we to “write people off” when it comes to our ministry! Think of it: If we have been called to go in the name of the Great Physician, it will NOT be to the healthy that we go and serve, BUT the sick, weak, and dying (Mark 2:17)!

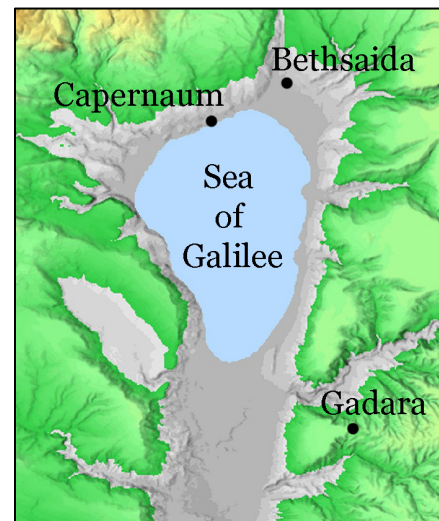
As that is the case, how are we to carry out this call? Notice with me the components of the command to “make disciples.”

- “Go therefore”: this phrase is frequently misunderstood. Many take it as the command of this verse and conclude that if are to prove faithful to the Great Commission WE must “Go” to a foreign land as a missionary. Yet, this is quite wrong! “Go therefore” is a participial phrase translated literally as “therefore, going,” “therefore, as you go,” or more accurately, “therefore, having gone...” (the verb is an aorist participial implying that this is something we *already* are doing!! [again, see footnote #2 below]). And thus, the force of this phrase is NOT that we should leave our present place of dwelling, go to a foreign land, and labor at “making disciples.” BUT rather that EVERY WHERE WE GO (just as we have been going) we are to be about the work of making disciples: at the workplace, the classroom, the life of a single, the ministry of marriage, etc...!

This was the call Christ gave to the Gadarene Demoniac upon his conversion. After Christ delivered him from the demons that had imprisoned him, this newly saved disciple longed to accompany Christ with the disciples.

Mark 5:18, “And as [Jesus] was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was entreating Him that he might accompany Him.”

In other words, this disciple wanted to join the Apostles and so accompany Christ as He continued in His ministry! Yet that was NOT this man’s particular calling. And so, Christ gave him an exhortation which is the essence of the first component of the Great Commission. Christ exhorted him.



Mark 5:19, “Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and *how* He had mercy on you.”

In other words, his call was NOT to leave physically to share the gospel in a foreign land, BUT “as he went” and lived his life in Gadara he was to be about the work of bringing Christ’s

Kingdom to the men and women in the community in which he lived!

From this we must see that “disciple-making” is NOT the activity of the spiritual elite or the work of ones who travel to foreign lands! RATHER it is to be the mindset of every child of God “as they go”!

You say, “But wait a minute! I don’t know enough! I don’t know how to share the gospel much less disciple another person! I need training!” I think we all appreciate the need for training (as we ourselves are disciples, that necessarily will involve a lifetime of study, instruction, and growth in grace). Yet, lack of training must never hold us back in ministry! That is the point of God in giving us spiritual gifts! They are endowments that enable us to do that which we innately are unable to do. In this regard, how much training did the Gadarene Demoniac have following his conversion prior to Christ sending him out? NONE!

So again, while we most certainly are NOT going to downplay the need for training, NEVERTHELESS a lack of training must never serve as an excuse for not involving yourself in people’s lives unto their salvation or growth in grace!

In fact, let me be a little stronger here. It is an alien thought that there could be Christians in the body of Christ who are NOT in some way on a daily basis endeavoring to bring about “the obedience of the faith” amongst people! Years ago a preacher ended his sermon on Matthew 6:33 (“seek first His Kingdom and righteousness”) with a barrage of questions, “Who are you praying for? Who are you endeavoring to encourage in Christ? Who are you longing for God to work redemptively?”

In this regard, let me encourage you! It is quite common to look at the work/ministry of a missionary or church leader and say, “I’d do that if it wasn’t for \_\_\_\_\_!” And yet we must see, based upon the text before us, that the only thing that should separate us from the work of another’s ministry is location!

Truly, as long as we “go” (whether to work, the store, etc...), we have as much a responsibility to “make disciples” as the missionary on the field or the one formally called to serve formally in Christ’s church!

#### End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> Other examples would be: If you want to know the aim and content of any attempt at Biblical parenting, it would be, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7) And if you wanted to know the essence of the message of Christianity, it would be, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

<sup>2</sup> Most take the aorist circumstantial participle “going” as an attendant circumstance amounting to a command. Similar use is found in Matthew 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7. While there is little question that this is the use of πορεύομαι (*poreuomai*) in this passage, my focus with this sermon is on the ministry of the individual Christian and the impact that the commission Christ gave here to the church

has on the individual, the majority of whom will never be called to go to a foreign mission field. How does this commission impact their life? It will be “as they go”!

<sup>3</sup> From v. 16, we understand that while this resurrection appearance included over 500 men (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:6), nevertheless Christ delivered this commission to the 11 whom He instructed to meet with Him on the mountain (cf. Matthew 28:16b; 26:32; 28:10).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Colossians 1:28; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Romans 1:5!!