

The Christmas Commission

Matt. 28:15-20

Intro. My calling and first priority has been to preach and teach God's Word and by doing that, feed you, His people. I want to thank you for being such faithful listeners and learners for so many years. I have always been humbled by your willingness to hear what God wants to say to us from His Word.

I'm reminded of the pastor who was a little grumpy one Monday morning. Disturbed by his grumpiness, his wife demanded an explanation. He said, *"You have to understand, dear...I had to preach twice yesterday!"* To that she replied, *"But you have to understand dear, I had to listen twice!"* So this morning, I'm thankful for you. Though it's my final message, I don't want to deviate from what God has asked me to do by finishing the study we began a couple of years ago. We come this AM to **Matt. 28:15-20** and a passage commonly known as the Great Commission. Matthew's Gospel ends with the final challenge from Jesus and I can't think of a text more appropriate for today than this.

As we've observed along the way, Matthew's Gospel isn't a random collection of stories and teachings. Instead the Holy Spirit has given us an orderly apologetic that proves Jesus is the Messiah, Savior and King of Creation. His account leads to a powerful climax in this closing chapter. What could be more climactic than Christ's resurrection and His strategy to reach the nations with His Good News of salvation? We commonly call **vs.19, 20** the Great Commission, but this AM I've chosen to call it, "The Christmas Commission." I can do this for several reasons:

- First, I can do it because it's my last message and I'm feeling sort of liberated and frisky.
- But second, Christmas honors the birth of Christ and the dawn of world redemption. In the opening chapter, Matthew's Gospel begins with heaven's announcement. The angel said to Joseph, **"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins."** - 1:21

For just a moment, I want you to think back on the shepherds in the Christmas story. These rugged men were overwhelmed by the matchless significance of Christ's birth. Isaiah said, the people were living in darkness when Jesus came...the darkness of ignorance, oppression and despair. It had been 400 yrs. since God had spoken through a prophet. The silence was deafening and hope was gone. Then on one remarkable night, God sent an angel in a glorious display of light. **The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. – Lk. 2:10, 11** When the angels left and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, **"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. – Lk. 2:15-18**

Notice... they said, **"Let's go"** and see for ourselves. That's how a personal spiritual journey often begins...with honest investigation. Then **when they had seen Him**...when they had seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus...they did what the nation Israel failed to do...they **spread the word** of God's amazing grace. The Christmas Commission had begun. The shepherds were the prototype missionaries...the first evangelists. They hadn't been to seminary nor did they take classes in evangelism. They simply told others **what had been told them about this child**. Years ago, Larry Moyer left us with a claim I'll never forget. He said, *"evangelism isn't easy, but it's not as hard as you're making it!"*

Ever since that first Christmas, people who trust and follow Jesus have Good News to share. The shepherds simply told others what they had been told about Jesus because Jesus is the message. What they heard was too good to sit on...too wonderful to keep to themselves. God had sent the Savior His people desperately needed and everybody needed to hear about it.

The angel said this arrival of Jesus was **good news of great joy...for all the people**. So the Lord of Heaven has a message of good news. Now at the end of Matthew's Gospel, we discover His plan to make it known. But for just a moment, I want to retrace our steps and draw your attention to **v.15**.

1. Our mission advances by love, grace and truth - v. 15 - So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Throughout Matthew we've seen how Jesus was opposed by the religious establishment. From His birth to the fact of His resurrection, He was disbelieved, denied and rejected. Israel's leaders consistently reacted with attitudes and behaviors opposite to the love, grace and truth displayed by Jesus. They were rife with hypocrisy and godlessness. Jesus called them **hypocrites, blind guides** and **white washed sepulchers**. He summed up their spiritual condition in **Matt. 15:8** when He said, **"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."** Israel's leaders were loveless, judgmental, legalistically demanding, untruthful and as Jesus said, **like their father the devil**. And as we see in **v.15**, they were determined to infect others with their leaven of unbelief.

And notice the collusion here. (Where have I heard that word?) In **v.15** we find the religious establishment colluding with secular government. The Roman soldiers who guarded the tomb were among the first enlisted by the Jews not only to crucify Jesus, but now to serve as anti-Christian disciples. This is the context in which Gospel proclamation has taken place from the first century until the present day. It's a coalition that hates, resists, and persecutes Christ and His Church. As we found in the trials of Jesus, this collusion of state religion and secular government doesn't follow the rules...they make the rules. And this coalition of opposition will continue right through the Tribulation. It's portrayed by the Church of Thyatira and the woman dressed in purple and scarlet who rides the beast in **Rev.17**.

Today Satan has an army of messengers who deny Christ and perpetrate false narratives. These deceivers are often supported by false religion and the government. And the lies they tell don't have to be good and they don't even have to make sense...they just have to be repeated. So as Matthew reports...**this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.**

For just a moment, think of the implications of what Matthew calls, **this story**...this false narrative and anti-Gospel lie. The consequences of every false teaching that denies Christ and His resurrection are enormous. Paul wrote, **if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. - I Cor. 15:14-17**

We could spend an hour unpacking these consequences, but let me simply put it this way...If Christ was not raised from the dead, there is no good news and humanity is without hope! That's it! Like Jenga, the tower of Christianity collapses when the resurrection block is removed. Sin, death and the grave ultimately win out. God's redemption fails with no endgame. Every Christmas celebration should immediately be cancelled because the dynamic and reason for holiday is gone if the Christ child lived and died like everybody else.

It was Satan, the deceiver who launched this misinformation campaign. He deceives the whole world. His propaganda machine is dedicated to distort and deny every truth that leads to salvation and life everlasting. By his efforts, people all around us are blinded, deceived and headed for eternal punishment. And Satan's forces are formidable and intimidating because they operate without love, grace or truth. Yet without Christ, they're also without hope.

But Christ inaugurated a plan that is guaranteed to succeed. He promised the gates of Hell would not prevail against it. His strategy is designed to promote the truth / rescue sinners / and usher in a kingdom that will last forever. Yet unlike the Adversary's methods, our Gospel mission advances by love, grace and truth. It's vital for us to remember this. Those who try to convert the world by means other than love, grace and truth are an aberration. They do more harm than good to the cause of Christ! Jesus taught His followers to love our enemies and pray for them. Peter was out of line when he wielded his sword. Our mission is really the continuation of Christ's mission. It's driven by love and characterized by a message and lifestyle of grace and truth. It's a mission that engages every believer and follower of Jesus. That's how Matthew's Gospel ends. The record that begins with the angel's announcement that God's greatest gift has arrived, ends with Christ's plan to spread the news of this gift throughout the world.

2. Our mission emerges from our worship – vs. 16, 17 - Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

In the resurrection story, the angel told the women that Jesus would go before them into Galilee and there they would meet Him. That's just what happened. Then acting in obedience to what the risen Lord said, **the eleven** went to a particular mountain in Galilee and Jesus met them there. In those days it took about a week to make the trek from Jerusalem to Galilee. So, at least a week had passed before His followers **saw** Jesus again. Scholars say this was most likely the occasion when more than 500 disciples were gathered to see and hear the risen Christ.

And notice, **when they saw him, they worshipped Him**. The magi who followed the star to Bethlehem a few years later, responded the same way. But isn't it true...when eyes are opened to see Jesus as He is, hearts and knees will bow. We're compelled to worship Him...to stand in awe of His majesty, greatness and holiness...to marvel at His power and love. Speaking of that event when Jesus was transfigured...John wrote, **We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. - Jn. 1:14b**

Someone has described worship this way...*“Worship is all that we are responding to all that God is.”* If our thoughts about Jesus are small, our worship will be superficial, ritualistic and boring. But the more we get to know the risen Christ on the pages of His Word and through fellowship with Him, the more authentic and exuberant our worship becomes. The more we come to terms with His majestic greatness, the less we'll think of ourselves and the peripheral stuff swirling around us. And the awe of worship isn't an end in itself. Praise, thankfulness and obedience emerge from worship.

So the worship of these early disciples was a matter of highest priority. Nothing was more appropriate than to worship Him. **Jn. 4:23** says the Father is seeking worshippers...not workers / teachers / missionaries or even evangelists. He is primarily seeking worshippers. Then emerging from knowing Jesus and worshipping Him is the desire and motivation to obey Him. This is why it's so critical for us to faithfully gather together as believers. We gather for worship, instruction and mutual encouragement. We come to meet with God that we might know Him better. Then we go out to serve Him. So, these first disciples were together worshipping the Lord Jesus before His command was given.

Now it's important for us to understand that the Christmas Commission (as we're calling it) isn't a suggestion or an optional activity until Jesus returns. The Christmas Commission is the concern that weighs most heavy on the heart of Jesus being impressed on our hearts. I wonder if we view evangelism and disciple-making in those terms? Do we see it as our opportunity to give others life's most precious gift? Do we see it as our love for Christ shown through obedience to His command? Do we see it as the conforming of our hearts to the heart of our loving Savior?

Jesus stated His purpose for coming to earth in **Lk. 19:10** when He said, **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”** So our mission is the continuation of His mission...a mission to seek and save the lost. This is why Jesus hasn't yet airlifted the Church to Heaven. There's a mission for us to complete. Again in **Jn.17:18** Jesus said, **As you sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.** Jesus sends us into the world for the same purpose He was sent to earth by His Father. He came to provide the unspeakable gift of salvation and He now calls us to deliver it.

But Satan is crafty and reactive. If one scheme fails, he always has some alternate strategy up his sleeve. If efforts to discount the message prove unsuccessful, he resorts to tempting and discouraging the messengers. One of his prime methods is to discourage and distract believers from sharing our faith. He does this by persuading us to think of our mission as a duty instead of a privilege...a burden instead of a blessing. He promotes the idea that we're salesmen pedaling a product instead of friends offering life's most precious gift free of charge. He promotes the idea that we're inadequate and unworthy to share this message of hope. He tempts us to become entangled in all sorts of temporal things so that we forget the essential commission and eternity.

Listening to his seductive suggestions, we make excuses and say, *“I'm afraid / I'm not trained / I'm shy / I just can't do it” / or “I'm not gifted that way.”* And to a large extent the Adversary is winning. He has successfully silenced believers and turned the Christmas Commission into the Christmas omission! The fact that we would struggle and be tempted this way comes as no surprise to Jesus. So before He gave His commission, He eliminated our excuses by promising our efforts would be made effective by His authority and His power...not our own.

3. Our mission is based on Christ's authority and power - v.18 - Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Jesus exhibited power over every realm. He taught with authority. His disciples were amazed as He exercised control over the laws and forces of nature / over deformity and disease / over demons. He demonstrated authority to forgive sin / and authority over life and death. Matthew presents Jesus as King so **authority** is a key word that appears 11 x's in this Gospel. Here Jesus said, **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."** **All** means **all**...it means every part.

Now authority and power work hand in hand. While the terms are often used inter-changeably, each has a distinct meaning that is essential to the success of our mission. **Power** refers to "the ability to do something or influence somebody to do something he/she would not have done". **Authority** refers to a claim of legitimacy, the justification and right to exercise that **power**.

Before I let an orthopedic surgeon use a reciprocating saw on my left knee, I checked his credentials. Where was he trained? Who endorses him? How many times has he performed this surgery before and with what success? I was delighted to learn he too is a believer! All 28 chapters of Matthew's Gospel were written to demonstrate the unique and supreme authority of Jesus Christ.

The fact that **all authority** belongs to Jesus enables His followers to speak with confidence. The Adversary wants us to think spiritual matters are personal, private and too sensitive to talk about. He suggests that we mind our own business and not butt into other people's private affairs. Paul didn't believe that. To the Athenians, he boldly declared the urgency of the Gospel. In **Acts 17:30, 31** he said, **“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”** Like evacuation orders in So. California last week, there's an urgency to our mission. God doesn't ask people to repent...He **commands all people everywhere to repent.**

A day of judgment is coming and no one who is unsaved will escape. So the message of hope we speak is based on Christ's authority...an authority proved by the power of His resurrection. **Titus 2:15** says, **These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.** We see this again in **II Cor. 5:20** - **We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.** An ambassador is one who speaks on behalf of and by the authority of some dignitary. The Christian represents the King of kings and Lord of lords. We speak what the King has spoken. By His authority we speak to others. Yet as we speak we should always be respectful and speak the truth in love. But we should never be timid, bashful or intimidated.

So our mission is based on Christ's authority but it's also made effective by His power. In **Acts 1:8** Jesus told His followers, **"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 the ends of the earth."** Over the years you've never seemed too impressed by the Greek words I've thrown at you from time to time. But **power** is *dunamis* in Greek. Our word dynamite comes from *dunamis*. That's what the Gospel is...it's dynamite! It's a message with inherent power. A person holding a lighted stick of dynamite is someone who inspires action and makes things happen. Am I right about that?

So as followers of Jesus, our mission is based on His authority and His power not our own. This promise disallows excuses. We should never be deceived to think, *"their spiritual life is none of my business"* or *"I wouldn't know how to get started or what to say."* To each believer Jesus promises His own power and authority. Because Jesus is Lord of all, He gives us the right to speak the truth as well as the ability to speak with powerful effect.

A team never knows the outcome of a contest until the clock runs out. But listen to the prophecy of **Dan. 2:27** - **Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.** The authority and power of Jesus undergirds our mission and guarantees the successful establishment of a kingdom that will last forever. The exciting thing is you and I can play a part in establishing this forever kingdom.

4. Our mission consists of disciple-making – vs.19, 20a - Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Therefore means because these things are true. The sole ground for the success of our mission is the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Remember, Jesus told Peter, **"I will build my Church."** And in **Jn. 15:5** Jesus said, **"Apart from me you can do nothing."** So as Christ's ambassadors and fellow workers, the mission advances and succeeds as Christ works in and through each of us.

In the Greek construction of **v.19**, there is one imperative command accompanied by three participles. I know you're all over this, but a participle is a word formed from a verb which serves like an adjective. Let me give you an example: *"The person dreaming of a blizzard for Christmas, ought to buy one at Dairy Queen."* The present participle is **dreaming**. The one imperative in **v.19** is the command to **make disciples**. A **disciple** is a learner or a follower. As believing disciples ourselves, we're called to **make disciples**. As followers of Jesus, we're commanded to influence others so that they too become His followers. The three participles are...**go, baptizing, teaching**. These participles define how or what's involved the process of making disciples.

And let me say this...disciple-making is a process like raising a child. It's a crock pot adventure, not a micro wave happening. It's a process that requires patience and persistence. Think of your own Christian life. If you're mature in Christ, did it happen over night...did it happen in isolation?

I don't want to be negative...but I fear some of us who have been saved many years have never actually made a disciple. We've never taken this command seriously or personally. Some time ago our leaders identified the fact that MBC is pretty good at making disciples...but not so good at making disciple-makers. We need to improve and our new pastor is gifted to help us that way. So let's consider these participles:

- *First*, our mission requires us to **go**. Going implies movement, right? We must move toward others and not expect them to come to us. We should be initiating contact with unsaved people on a regular basis. We should pray for them as we share the Good news. We're to **go** just as the shepherds did...and just like the women who first learned that Jesus is alive. We should all have at least a mental list of people we're concerned about and praying for.
- *Second*, our mission involves **baptizing** those who come to faith in Jesus. Baptism by immersion is an outward testimony to inward faith. It's the ordinance that allows a believing sinner to go public with their decision to follow Christ. By immersion, we identify with the person and work of Jesus who died, was buried and raised from the dead for us. It's tragic that many who claim to be Christians have never been baptized. Baptism is distinct a part of disciple-making.
- *Third*, Jesus said our mission involves **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**. In **Jn.17:7** Jesus prayed, **Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth**. So our mission involves teaching new disciples the Bible where we discover the whole will of God. This isn't just cognitive learning or the accumulation of facts. It's teaching with a view to a transformed life...Jesus said, **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded**.

We might ask, was this command given to individual disciples or was this command given in a more corporate way to the Church at large? The answer is "yes." It's a command given both to individuals like you and me and to the Church as we devote our hearts and energies to this common mission.

The Christmas Commission really boils down to a new life orientation as citizens of Christ's kingdom. If we lived for ourselves before we trusted Jesus, we must learn to live for Jesus and others. In **II Cor. 5:15** Paul wrote, **And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again**. We must go to lost friends with the love, grace and truth we received. If our goal in life was the accumulation of money and things, we must undergo a transformation where people become our priority. If the credos we lived by were "mind your own business" / "do your own thing" / or "have your own way", we need to submit to Christ's Lordship and become obedient to His command. And let's be honest... we can't say we're obeying the Lord if we aren't somehow involved in making disciples. However we regard this Christmas Commission, it demands that we alter the orientation of our lives.

5. Our mission is assured of Christ's continuing presence – v. 20b - And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

In these closing words of Matthew's Gospel, we find a relational promise Christians have relied on all through this Age of Grace. No matter what may come, we're assured of Christ's continuing presence. In sharing our faith, making disciples, facing life's challenges, or even facing persecution and martyrdom... we're never alone. Christ has promised to be with us. The NT says we are co-laborer's together with Him. Like oxen bound together by a yoke, Jesus joins Himself to us to make our service effective and our burden light.

By this final promise we're again taken back to the Christmas story. In **Matt. 1:23** the angel told Joseph, **"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."** Who is Jesus...He is God with us. Just as God came to be with us in the person of His Son, so Jesus remains with us in the person of His Spirit. Before Jesus was crucified, He spoke of His departure.

He told His disciples, **And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever--the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.** - Jn. 14:16-18 So Jesus is not only with us, but He remains in us permanently in the person of His Holy Spirit.

As we finish this AM, notice the last phrase in v.20...**to the very end of the age.** As I've shared with you so many times, God has a pre-planned endgame. Unlike the hands of a clock, time isn't circular. It doesn't go round and round endlessly. Time is lineal and sovereignly controlled by the God who exists outside of time. This reality encouraged Paul to write, **now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.** (II Cor. 6:2) He also wrote, **The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.** (Rom. 13:11)

The fact that God has planned an end to this age when the Gospel is freely offered to humanity means that time is running out for those who have never heard or not believed. Many around us are without Christ and without hope. Along with the end of the age, each life has a beginning and an end and the death rate is alarmingly high. So there's a distinct urgency to our mission. We shouldn't procrastinate. People need the Lord and we have the message of hope that can improve their lives for time and save their souls for eternity. Like the giving of a gift, we're not salesmen, but benefactors. Each of us is called to obey our Savior by using the grace gifts He's given us. By His authority and by His power, each of us is called to engage in His Christmas Commission. I'm sure I'll have future opportunities to speak at MBC, but let these words from Jesus, be my final charge to you!