Lesson Thirteen

A Command, Not a Suggestion

Focal Text
Matthew 28:16-20

Background
Matthew 28:16-20

Main Idea
Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all people.

Question to Explore
If you and your church were as serious as Jesus is in the command, “make disciples,” what would you do?

Quick Read
When we make disciples, we fulfill Jesus’ purpose for his people.

Commentary
Once upon a time there was a stonecutter. He lived all alone. Although he had great skills, he was very poor. He lived in a tiny bamboo hut and wore tattered clothing.

One day as the stonecutter worked with his hammer and chisel on a huge stone, he heard the king’s procession approaching his humble village. Joining the crowd, he stood in awe at the marvelous silk robes and regal splendor of the king. Oh, how I wish I had the power and glory of the king, he thought. He has soldiers at his command. No one is more powerful.
His cry was heard, and immediately the humble stonecutter was transformed into a powerful king, riding a great horse, waving at the crowds who flocked to see him. This is power, he thought.

As summer came, however, the king watched the power of the sun on his people. Men, animals, and plants withered under its powerful rays. How I wish I were as powerful as that, he thought. I wish I were the sun. And immediately his wish was granted.

The stonecutter relished his new role as the sun, and gloried in his power over the earth below. Then one day a tiny cloud moved over the land, shielding the earth from his bright rays. Seeing that here was something more powerful than himself, he thought, I want very much to be a cloud.

Again his wish was granted. Now he blocked the sun’s rays and felt important. He poured rain on the earth, flooding the streets and farmlands below. Everything was under his power, except the rocks. Again he had found something more powerful than he. There is nothing as powerful as a rock, he thought. How I wish I were a huge stone. His wish was granted.

As a stone he remained motionless and powerful, unmoved by sun or wind or rain. He felt exempt from all the forces that shaped the existence of those around him. Then one day a man approached, carrying a bag. When he stopped, he pulled out a chisel and hammer and began to chip away at the rock. Realizing that the man with the tools was more powerful than any rock, he cried out, Oh, I want to be a stonecutter.

Once again his cry was heard, and he became a stonecutter. Once again he lived in a bamboo hut and made his living with hammer and chisel. And he was at peace, for he had found his life’s purpose at last.

We must each find our reason for being. What is your purpose, your vision for your life? What did Jesus believe it should be? This week we will explore the mission statement he assigned to every church. While the Great Commission is familiar to most Christians, there is more to its imperative than meets the eye. As long as a single person remains undisipled, we must continue to study it and commit ourselves anew to its fulfillment.

**Obey Jesus’ last word to you**

Our last study left Jesus in the temple precincts, where he confronted his critics and taught his followers. As he left the temple, he warned his disciples that it would soon be destroyed and they would face severe persecution (Matthew 24:1-35), but that he would return at an hour known only to the Father (Matt. 24:36-51). He illustrated the urgency of preparation for his return by the parables of the ten virgins (25:1-13), the talents (25:14-30), and the sheep and the goats (25:31-46).
Meanwhile, Jesus’ enemies were plotting his arrest (26:1-5) as he was anointed at Bethany (26:6-13). Judas agreed to betray him (26:14-16) before the disciples shared the Last Supper together (26:17-30). Jesus predicted their denials (26:31-35), prayed in Gethsemane (26:36-46), and was arrested there (26:47-56). His Jewish trials (26:57-68) and Peter’s denials (26:69-75) set the stage for Good Friday.

Matthew 27 tells the story of Judas’s suicide (27:1-10), Jesus’ trials before the Roman authorities (27:11-26), his torture (27:27-31), and his crucifixion (27:32-56) and burial (27:57-66). Matthew 28 then proclaims the miraculous news of his resurrection (28:1-10) and the cover-up by the authorities (28:11-15).

Now our text begins: “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go” (28:16). “Then” translates de, probably better rendered but in this context. The word serves to separate the manipulative intrigue of the religious authorities (28:11-15) from what comes next.

“Disciples” translates mathetes, meaning pupils, apprentices, adherents, followers. Jesus chose the Twelve from the larger group of 500 or more followers (1 Corinthians 15:6) associated with his movement:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor (Luke 6:12-16).

They went to “Galilee” in obedience to Jesus’ command (Matt. 28:16). Jesus earlier had told them, “after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee” (26:32; see Mark 14:28). The risen Christ had told the women at his empty tomb to “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Matt. 28:10).

So “the eleven disciples” returned to their homeland, specifically to “the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.” Mountains served as places of revelation throughout Matthew’s Gospel (see 4:8; 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 26:30). Jesus ate with his disciples beside the Sea of Galilee prior to this event (John 21:1); this “mountain” was likely in the vicinity of the lake, perhaps the Mount of Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1).

This event probably occurred near the end of the forty-day period that the risen Lord spent with his disciples (Acts 1:3). If they had refused his order to meet in Galilee, they would have missed his commission. It is the same with us—obedience leads to revelation. When we submit to God’s word and will, we position ourselves to hear his word and receive his direction for our lives. Jesus can lead only those who will follow.
Have you obeyed the last word you heard from God? Are you open to the next?

**Worship even when you doubt**

What comes next is one of my favorite statements in Scripture: “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted” (Matt. 28:17). “When they saw him” (idontes auton) renders a phrase that means that the disciples did not see Jesus until they reached the specified mountain. “Worshiped” translates proskyneo, meaning to prostrate oneself before another. “Doubted” renders distazo, meaning to waver or hesitate.

The juxtaposition of the two describes the response to the risen Christ that many of us offer today. They “worshiped” Jesus, as the women had done earlier (28:9) and as billions of Christians do today. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30), a commitment that expresses itself in public and private worship. When we see God as he is, we cannot help but be moved by his majesty. From Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8) to John on Patmos (Revelation 1:17), those who meet God are awed by him.

At the same time, some of the eleven “doubted,” as their minds were divided or troubled. Jesus used this same word in describing his disciples’ fear and doubt on the stormy Sea of Galilee (Matt. 14:31). Why did they still harbor doubts about the risen Christ?

It could be that they were not sure that this was really Jesus. Remember that the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize the risen Christ (Luke 24:16) and that the disciples in the boat did not know him on the shore (John 21:4). Or it could be that some were not yet convinced that his resurrection was real. Like Thomas (John 20:25), they struggled to understand and accept his glorified presence. The Easter miracle was so stupendous that it might have shocked them into incredulity.

Some scholars suggest that others beside the Eleven were present with them at this time and that the doubters were in their number. However, the text describes the Eleven and no others. It is most likely that they were struggling intellectually with the kind of risen Lord he would be. They still wanted a military Messiah, one who would “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). Yet he was taking no apparent steps toward such a political initiative.

We should not be surprised by doubts, even in the minds of those who worship Jesus. In Isaiah 1:18 our Lord invites us to “reason together” with him—the Hebrew literally says, argue it out. John the Baptist had doubts about him (Matt. 11:2-3), as did his own family (Mark 3:21). As long as we are fallen people living in a fallen world, we will struggle with questions about our faith. But we can worship even as we doubt, knowing that the former will help us deal with the latter.
When last did you worship Jesus personally and passionately? Do you remember the hymns or choruses you sang to him last Sunday? What doubts about Jesus’ person or ways are present in your mind today? Would you name them and take them to him? Would you invite your class members to do the same?

**Submit to Jesus’ purpose**

What follows is the most stupendous claim ever made in human history: “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (Matt. 28:18). “Authority” translates *exousia*, meaning *official power or rights*. No Napoleon, Caesar, Hitler or Tsar ever suggested he was the ruler of both the Earth and the heavens. But Jesus did.

This assertion fulfilled the vision given to Daniel centuries earlier:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

Now this authority “has been given” (*edothe*) to Jesus. The Greek forms a *timeless aorist*, referring to a past decision with ongoing consequences. This authority has already been given by the Father to the Son and will last forever. Jesus earlier claimed that “all things have been committed to me by my Father” (Matt. 11:27) and that “the Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands” (John 3:35). Now Jesus claimed this authority in the context of his purpose for his people.

**Make disciples**

What does Jesus command us to do? “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19a).

Making disciples was Jesus’ central purpose and task. The word *disciple* appears in the Gospels numerous times. As we have seen, Jesus prayed all night before selecting his first disciples (Luke 6:12-13). He lived with them for three years. He entrusted his mission into their hands. His first priority was making disciples. Now he tells us that it is ours as well.

Unlike the Jewish rabbis of his day, Jesus chose his students (Mark 1:16-17). He called them to leave everything to follow him. A disciple of Jesus was a person who followed him with full commitment and devotion and led others to do the same.
We are called to make such disciples “of all nations.” “Nations” translates _ethnos_, from which we get _ethnic_. It refers to people groups. Every population on earth deserves to hear the message of God’s redeeming love. We are to go to them, not waiting for them to find us.

Why is disciple-making so critical to global evangelism? Because multiplication is the only way to reach the world. If I win one person to Christ every day for thirty-three years, 12,045 people would be in heaven. But if I win one person a year and disciple that person so that the person can reproduce himself or herself by winning another, and this process continues at the rate of one per year for thirty-three years, 8,589,934,592 people would be in heaven, more than the entire current population of the world. If I could win and disciple _one a day_ following this pattern, in thirty-three days the entire world would know Christ.

**Baptize**

How do we “make disciples”? First by “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19b). What is baptism? Why is it so important to global missions and ministry? Let’s gather together the biblical facts on this crucial subject.

First, baptism as a sign of Christian conversion is the consistent pattern across the New Testament:

- Peter exhorted the Pentecost crowd, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). With this result: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41).
- When the Ethiopian met Philip, “The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?’ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:34-38).
- When Peter met the Gentile Cornelius and his family, “Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:46-48).
- When Lydia became the first European convert, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home” (Acts 16:14-15).
After God sent an earthquake to free Paul and Silas from their Philippian jail, "The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of God to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family" (Acts 16:29-34).

In Corinth, "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized" (Acts 18:8).

Paul wrote to the Romans, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3-4).

He instructed the Colossians, "In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11-12).

Second, such a commitment follows faith. At Pentecost, "those who accepted his message were baptized" (Acts 2:40). The Ethiopian heard the gospel before he was baptized by Philip. Cornelius received the Spirit before he was baptized; Lydia responded to the gospel before she was baptized; the Philippian jailer responded to the gospel before he was baptized. We do not find a single person in the Bible who was baptized before he or she came to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, baptism is for anyone who comes to Christ. Children can be baptized if they have trusted in Christ. With the Philippian jailer, after Paul and Silas "spoke the word of God to him and to all the others in his house," they baptized them (Acts 16:32). Crispus “and his entire household believed in the Lord” before they were baptized (Acts 18:8).

Anyone who is old enough to be a “disciple” (Matt. 28:19), who has chosen to follow and obey Jesus as Lord, are old enough to be baptized. But they must come to Christ first. No other requirements exist. No denominational affiliation is necessary; no feelings or actions must be demonstrated first.

Fourth, baptism is by immersion. “Baptize” comes from the Greek word baptizo, which means to dip. It is found in ancient literature to describe the act of dipping a cup under water, or washing clothes. It simply means to immerse.
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After Jesus was baptized, he “went up out of the water” (Matt. 3:16). At the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, “both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:38-39).

According to Paul, baptism pictures the fact that we were “buried with him through baptism into death” and raised with him to new life (Rom. 6:4). We have been “buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God” (Col. 2:12).

Last, baptism is a symbol of conversion. In the context of the Great Commission, we are called to “make disciples” by “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Jesus spoke of the Father and the Son (11:27) and warned about sin against the Spirit (12:28-32) while promising the Spirit’s coming (John 15:26). Now Jesus placed all three members of the Trinity in a baptism formula that eventually became common for New Testament faith.

Paul prayed for the Corinthians, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Converts were baptized in the “name” (Matt. 28:19; meaning by the authority) of all three members of the Trinity in a public act by which they showed their faith to the world. As such, it indicates our commitment to evangelize the lost and lead them to witness before others. This is the first indispensable step in world discipleship.

Teach
The second is equally vital: “and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:20a). “Teaching” translates didasko, meaning to instruct. “Obey” renders tereo, meaning to guard, keep, observe. “Everything” translates panta, meaning all. “Commanded” translates entello, meaning to order. Jesus’ commands, from the first of his public ministry to his last words, are his marching orders to his Kingdom soldiers.

In response to this injunction, early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Paul instructed Timothy, “the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Such teaching is for the purpose of equipping God’s people to extend the Kingdom around the world:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach
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unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Are you living by Jesus’ commands? Are you teaching Jesus’ commands each week by your example and your words?

Trust
The last part of the Great Commission gives us the assurance that we can fulfill it: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20b). In what way is Jesus “with” us today?

Jesus is praying for us at this very moment (Rom. 8:34). His Spirit indwells and guides us today (1 Corinthians 3:16). And one day Jesus will take us to his home in paradise, where he will be with us forever (John 14:1-6). As the Lord promised his presence to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:12), so Jesus promises his empowering presence to us today. He has given us all we need to do all he has called us to do.

Do you teach and live in dependence on his Spirit? A. W. Tozer (1897-1963), noted pastor, preacher, and author, stated, “God is looking for those through whom he can do the impossible—what a pity that we plan only the things that we can do by ourselves.”

Conclusion
Sadly, the Great Commission has sometimes been labeled, the great omission. No purpose is more urgent than the cause of world evangelism, beginning where you live with the people you know.

In that context, perhaps this extended reading from William Booth (1829-1912), founder of the Salvation Army, may prove motivational for your class this week:

I saw a dark and stormy ocean. Over it the black clouds hung heavily; through them every now and then vivid lightnings flashed and loud thunders rolled, while the winds moaned, and the waves rose and foamed and fretted and broke and rose to foam and fret and break again.

In that ocean I thought I saw myriads of poor human beings plunging and floating, shouting and shrieking, cursing and struggling and drowning; and as they cursed and shrieked, they rose and shrieked again, and then sank to rise no more.

And out of this dark angry ocean I saw a mighty rock that rose up with its summit towering high above the black clouds that overhung the stormy sea; and all round the base of this rock I saw a vast platform; and on this platform I saw with delight a number of the poor, struggling, drowning wretches continually climbing out of
the angry ocean; and I saw that a number of those who were already safe on the platform were helping the poor creatures still in the angry waters to reach the same place of safety. . . .

And as I looked I saw that the occupants of that platform were quite a mixed company. That is, they were divided into different “sets” or castes and occupied themselves with different pleasures and employments; but only a very few of them seemed to make it their business to get the people out of the sea. . . . Some of them were absorbed night and day in trading, in order to make gain, storing up their savings in boxes, strong rooms and the like. . . . Many spent their time in amusing themselves with growing flowers on the side of the rock; others in painting pieces of cloth, or in playing music, or in dressing themselves up in different styles and walking about to be admired.

Some occupied themselves chiefly in eating and drinking, others were greatly taken up with arguing about the poor drowning creatures in the sea and as to what would become of them in the future, while many contented themselves that they did their duty to the perishing creatures by the performances of curious religious ceremonies. . . .

And all this time the struggling, shrieking multitudes were floating about in the dark sea, quite near by—so near that they could easily have been rescued.¹

Who is floating by your church this week?
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