

Series: Called to Follow

“The Disciple’s Great Commission”

Matthew 28:18-20

Today we open God’s Word to one of the most familiar passages in all the Bible as we come to the final sermon in our series. When we began this study at the beginning of the year I had every intention it would conclude before Easter, but as the Lord led along the way there were several other things that He highlighted that I believe He wanted us to hear. For those who are joining us for the first time or for the first time in a long time, we have been going through a study entitled “Called to Follow.” We have been looking at what it means to truly be a disciple of Jesus. As we have studied the gospel accounts we’ve been identifying what should be evident in the life of an individual who truly belongs to the Lord. Many people today call themselves “Christian,” but that does not mean that all of these people have a relationship with God. So by going through this study, we have applied the command in Scripture from **2 Corinthians 13:5**, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you - unless indeed you fail the test?” This study has allowed us to examine if we truly know Jesus and are in a right relationship with Him. Throughout this time there are several who have come to know the Lord and there are many who have rededicated their life to Christ, and we give God all the praise for what He’s doing. Even more, God has worked through this time for followers of Christ to be reminded of what the Lord desires of us, and it has shown us areas in which we need to grow. I don’t think there is a more fitting way to conclude this study than to conclude it with the Lord’s final charge to His disciples. Pastor Mark said it well last month, “Last words are weighty.” They stick with you. ****ILL:** I remember when I was ten years old there was a man in my home church that I loved greatly. His name was Gene Pitzer. He worked for the State Treasurer’s department, but I simply knew him as “Brother Gene.” Because my grandparents lived 2 hours away, he and his family became like adopted family. They would babysit us, take care of us, feed us, etc. I remember when he became sick with a very aggressive cancer. He had surgery but it was largely unsuccessful, and as he sat in the hospital his days were coming to a close. My parents asked if I would like to visit him, and I agreed. I remember walking into the room and immediately seeing him in that condition and beginning to cry. I’d never seen anyone look so frail. But, he did two things next that I will never forget. First, he made me laugh. One of the devices on his hand had a light at the tip of his finger. He held up his finger and said, “Don’t cry, this is cool. I get to be like ET, ‘ET phone home.’ ” He had a huge laugh. Second, he invited me to come close for a hug and then he said these words, “Matthew, I’m getting ready to go to heaven. I don’t want you to cry, but I do want you to do something for me. I want you to keep praying that a whole lot more people will come to heaven with me one day.” In such a simple way that a child could understand, he was reminding me of what was most important. That was the last time I talked to him, and less than a week later I was at his funeral. My point is that the last words are weighty. They may be few, but they are important, and if we heed them they tend to stay with us. Similarly, Jesus gathered His disciples after He’d risen from the grave. He had spent the last 40 days appearing to multiple witnesses having conversations with them and giving inarguable proof of who He is as the resurrected Christ. Now He called them together to the Mount of Olives. His time with them is coming to a close because He is about to ascend into heaven, where He will go to make intercession for the saints and to prepare a place for all who believe. As they’re gathered together, Jesus gives this final charge to His disciples. Let’s stand together as we read.

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What we have read today are some of the most practical, yet powerful words of Jesus to those who are followers of Him. To those who do not know Jesus today, I invite you to turn from your sin and put your trust and faith completely in Him. He is the only One who can save your soul, pardon your sin, and set you free. For all who have already become Christians, this Great Commission is written specifically for us. As simple as it is, however, I am concerned that there is a major problem that most of us have with these verses. What is the problem? I don't know that we actually believe them. We say we believe the Word of God, but do we really? We say we believe that every word is inspired, but is that actually true? We say that the Bible is inerrant, but if that were truly our belief then we wouldn't leave parts out. We can claim to believe many things, but belief without action is pointless. **James 2:20** says it plainly, "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless (dead)?" We can say we believe the Bible, we believe the words of Jesus, and that we understand the Great Commission, but it is not until we actually put it into practice that we have proven that our faith is genuine. My prayer for us today is that God captures our hearts anew and afresh with who we are called to be in Christ and what He has called us to do. I want you to observe with me three observations from the text:

I. The Conviction of the Great Commission (vs. 18)

The church has long known the Great Commission, but in many ways, we have not done a great job. There are still today over 7,200 unreached people groups throughout the world. An UPG is labeled as such because there is no community of Christians present through which the Gospel can be shared. Still today, there are somewhere between 3-4 billion people who have never even heard the name of Christ (from Nations Outreach). Sadly, there are more people familiar with the names Google, Apple, and CocaCola, than they are with Jesus. Yet, we go on our merry way seemingly unbothered and unconcerned for their situation and their souls. Why do we sit unchanged? Why are we not moved with compassion for the nations? God has a heart for the nations. Jesus told the disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth," **Acts 1:8**. We know the Great Commission, it is even a part of our mission statement at Crosslink. We are "Impacting the Valley and Blessing the Nations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ," but why are so many not doing it? By far and large, why are we not sharing the Gospel with those on the ballfield, in our neighborhoods, our co-workers, and our families? Why are we not sharing the Gospel with strangers we meet like waiters and waitresses, the guy sitting by us on the plane, or the lady cutting our hair? There are many responses we may give.

We could give some quick common answers: Perhaps we would say that **Fear** prevents us from sharing the Gospel with others. We are afraid of the repercussions. "What if they reject me? What if they get mad? What if I lose my job? What if I am persecuted? What if I don't have all the answers to their questions?" These are all common questions that God addresses in His Word. Perhaps some would say that **Doubt** prevents them. They doubt their personal ability, knowledge, or skill to share the Gospel. They doubt the other person will want to hear their message, or whether or not it will even do any good. When it comes to going on a mission overseas, they doubt their safety, God's financial provision, and a host of other elements. Perhaps some are hindered by **Distractions**. Their life is so busy and fast-paced that they are distracted by temporary things and

miss the eternal things. Their thoughts are consumed with kids, work, sports, weather, the house project, hobby, etc. and there isn't much thought, time, or effort spent taking the Good News to those who are dying without it. Finally, perhaps some would even admit that **Complacency** is their biggest hindrance. Many Christians state that their Christian *walk* is so complacent that it has become less than even a *crawl*. They are comfortable and complacent, they don't pray like they should, or spend time with God in His Word like they should, and as a result, there are many aspects of their calling as Christians that they are lax in. Frankly, we will not have the heart **of** God for others, if we don't first have a heart **for** God.

All of these are common things that hinder us from fulfilling the Great Commission, but at the heart of all of these is one glaring problem. If you can relate to these hindrances, I want you to know what is likely at the root of these symptoms. The problem is a lack of conviction. We don't fully believe what Jesus said in Matthew 28:18. While the emotions and concerns are normal, it is our conviction and faith in God's Word that enables us to overcome them. This conviction is simply this – that Jesus has all “authority” in heaven and on earth. The word for “authority” here means “power, authority, weight.” And the phrase “in heaven and on earth” means that it is universal. There is nowhere the Lord doesn't have all authority and power. Let's park here for a minute. Don't rush past the verse to get to the verses we already know.

Is there anything that God can't do? Didn't He deliver Israel from the oppressive rule of the Egyptians? Didn't God part the waters of the Red Sea and lead them across on dry land? Didn't God make the walls of Jericho crash to the ground? Didn't God defeat a mighty giant with a shepherd boy and a slingshot? Didn't God raise up a cupbearer to be a general contractor with a whole team of volunteers to do in 52 days what hadn't been accomplished in over 140 years? Didn't God raise kings and remove kings? Didn't He route impossible armies? Friend, there is nothing God can't do! **Luke 1:37** explains, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Miracles great and small, God can do them all! Think about the second person of the Godhead, the Son of God, Jesus. Didn't Jesus turn the water into wine? Didn't Jesus heal a blind man with spit and some clay? Didn't Jesus look at a hopeless leper and make him cured and clean? Didn't Jesus tell a lame man to rise and walk, and He got up and began to praise the Lord? Didn't Jesus stand at the tomb of Lazarus who had been dead for four days? The people said, “Lord, He already stinks. His body is already decaying.” But, Jesus said, “Lazarus, come forth!” In an instant, Lazarus rose again from the dead. And, if that weren't enough, Jesus Himself willingly laid down His life and died on the cross for our sins. They put His lifeless body in a grave and rolled the stone over it, and on the third day He rose again, victorious over death, sin, and hell itself. Please, somebody tell me, is there anything that God can't do?

Most of the time we skip right to verses 19-20, but we must understand that the very basis for the Great Commission is that Jesus has all power and authority. In other words, it is His power and authority that thrusts us forward to take the Gospel everywhere we go, even to the ends of the earth. We will not fulfill the Great Commission without a Great Conviction in the power and authority of Jesus. Perhaps what is most shocking of all is not that God could or would do all these things, but what He promised to His disciples in **John 14:12**, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and **greater** works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.” He said this because He knew that He would send the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit would continue His work through them. Today as we walk with the Lord and surrender to Him, the Holy Spirit continues His work through us. Praise the Lord!!!!

II. The Callings of the Great Commission (vs. 19)

With the right understanding that the basis for our calling is not **our** power or authority but the unlimited authority and power of Jesus, He now spells out what this Great Commission entails. There are two words of instruction, the latter of which He gives a few words of explanation.

A. Go

How simple could one word be? Simply put, “Go.” This is a word that we all use regularly. We may say that we need to **go** to the store, tell a child to **go** to their room, ask a friend to **go** on a trip with us, or ask a coworker to **go** to lunch. The implication of going is that we are leaving our current place. This is vital if we are to fulfill our purpose here on this earth.

Please understand clearly that this does not dismiss or diminish our relationships and responsibilities to one another here in the body of Christ. The Lord wants us to be in close fellowship with one another. I love the imagery of the Early Church when on the day of Pentecost 3,000 souls were saved. **Acts 2:42, 44** says, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...And all those who had believed were **together** and had all things in common.” What a beautiful picture of the love they had for Jesus and the love and unity that they had for one another in Christ. It should also be further stated that the Lord commands us to be together in fellowship and worship together. **Hebrews 10:24-25** says, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling **together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” Every single follower of Christ should be connected in a body of believers where we are doing life **together** and showing the love and unity of Christ. Frankly, this is one of the many wonderful things I love about Crosslink. We love each other and we are unified in Him. One of the greatest highlights of my week is getting to be with you on Sundays, and I love the fellowship afterward and the fact that many of you hang out as long as you can.

While this is true, it is also true that our calling is to go out from here with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus has already stated this to the disciples before His death. When giving a series of parables about His kingdom, He concludes in **Luke 14:23**, “And the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled.’” The implication is that the Lord wants us, as His servants, to compel others to come to Him, but what step must be taken first? The servant must go out. Most of us, however, struggle with this because we know that “in here” is a lot safer than “out there.” Yet, Jesus still commissioned His disciples in **Matthew 10:16**, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.” I love the connection that Luke places with this statement in **Luke 10:2-3**, “And He (Jesus) was saying to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.’” We like that part because it’s easy to pray for God to send others, but listen to what Jesus said next, “Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.’” Brothers and sisters in Christ, we should never expect a harvest where we have not been willing to sow. In order to sow the seeds of the Gospel, we must be willing to go.

Where do we go? Jesus says plainly in **verse 19**, “all the nations.” **Acts 1:8** specifically states, “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” The KJV is probably more emphatic with the “uttermost part of the earth.” There should be no nation left untouched. We should be spreading the Gospel from our house to our neighborhood, to our community, to our city, to our state, to our nation, to our continent, and even to the ends of the earth until all have heard the Good News of Jesus. What hope does mankind have for salvation if we are not willing to go and share the only way to salvation? Again, we say we believe the Bible. We say that we believe Jesus when He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me,” **John 14:6b**. But I ask us to consider, “What are we doing then to take the Way, the Truth, and the Life to those in need?”

It is important for us to understand, though, that this calling to go to the nations does not simply mean that we must get on a plane and go to another land. The literal Greek word used here is more familiar than we might think. It is the word “ethne.” It is where we get our English word “ethnic” from. In other words, we’re not only speaking of literal nations but also the people of the nations. Friends, look around us. We live in a city where God is bringing the nations to us. Did you know that just in the Harrisonburg City Schools alone there are over 70 languages spoken by students? The last time I checked, Harrisonburg High School represented 59 languages in one school alone. God is bringing the nations right here. Just in the past eighteen months, our church partnership with the SBCV has planted a Hispanic church here, and now an Eritrean Church. Why? Because God has brought many here who need the Gospel. It is not only about the nations, it is also about the “townies” who have been here for years. Did you know that here in Harrisonburg nearly 50% of the population claim no religious affiliation at all? Did you know that here in the Harrisonburg metro area, only 27.3% of people identify as Evangelical Christians? That number increases a bit when you move into the County, but it should vividly make us aware of the need for the Gospel to go out from here.

This word “go” is a word of instruction, yes, but in Greek it is a present participle, which means it shows an ongoing action. The literal translation would be “as you are going.” And even more amazing is that the Greek word for “go” literally means “to go, to transport, to move something from one destination to another.” As followers of Christ, what are we transporting as we go? What are we delivering from one destination to another? We are delivering the Good News that Jesus came to save sinners. We must take this everywhere go, even to the ends of the earth.

B. Disciple

The next calling is to disciple those who believe the Good News. It is amazing to me the number of English translations that completely take this word out of the Scripture. Some translations simply say “teach,” but the original text in Greek clearly states the word “disciple.” Several modern translations include the word “make” to describe that this is a process, but the word “make” is also not in the original text. Scripture simply says “disciple” them. The word disciple is often considered a noun, but in this case it is an action that followers of Christ are being commanded to fulfill. How do we do that? What is the process? The Bible gives us a measure of flexibility and freedom and does not spell out every detail, but it does give us two specific aspects of this calling:

1. Baptize – This Is a Believer’s Declaration of Christ

When a person repents of their sin and calls upon Jesus to save them, in that very moment they are forgiven of their sins, their soul is saved, and the Holy Spirit of God begins to indwell them. In that moment they are born again, given a new life in Christ. This is something that happens personally and internally in that moment of faith and obedience. But this personal internal commitment to Christ should also lead to a public declaration of Christ. Jesus gave us the ordinance of baptism as a **picture** of His death, burial, and resurrection. Some may question why we baptize by immersion at Crosslink. There are several reasons for this. First, the word “baptize” literally means “to sink, submerge, or overwhelm.” In that culture, the word was often used to describe the sinking of a ship, the immersing of a cloth completely in water for washing or dyeing it with color, or an object that was overwhelmed as in being pushed under something. Please know that when we baptize here, we don’t want you to sink to the bottom and never come up. ☺ You are put under the water and brought up as a picture of what Jesus did for us. Jesus was lifted on a cross where He died. His body was taken down and buried in a tomb, and then on the third day He rose again from the grave. The picture of immersion is a demonstration that we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in the newness of life. Not only is it a powerful picture, but it is a powerful **declaration** that we no longer live for ourselves but for the Savior who gave Himself for us and to us. **Romans 6:4-5** says it simply, “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death (baptism), certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection.” Baptism is so clearly a part of God’s calling for Christians that when you read through the book of Acts, every time a person believed and repented they were immediately baptized. **Acts 2:41** says, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and **that day** there were added about three thousand souls.” In **Acts 8:37b-38** Philip was ministering to the Ethiopian eunuch, and the eunuch confessed, “ ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.” There are many others, but my favorite is **Acts 16:33** when Paul and Silas had been imprisoned and beaten. God moved in such an incredible way that the jailer began to realize his own need for salvation. Paul called him to believe in the Lord and right there he trusted in Jesus. Having been changed, “He took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and **immediately** he was baptized, he and all his household.” These are just a sampling of what took place, but the calling to baptize is clear.

2. Teach – This Is a Believer’s Development in Christ

Being a true disciple, a follower of Christ, is a whole lot more than just praying a prayer, getting baptized, and checking boxes. Jesus calls us and invites us to a relationship with Him, and He also works through the Church to help us learn about Him and grow as a disciple. In that culture, a disciple would attach himself to a teacher, identify with him, learn from him, do life with him, and take in everything that was being shared. In other words, a true follower of Christ is going to be a student, a learner of the Lord. As a follower of Christ, it is also our calling to help others learn and grow in the Lord. Perhaps you may think, “But Pastor, that’s why we have you. We pay you to do that job.” Please understand, I am honored for God’s calling on my life, and I am grateful for the opportunity to be an under-shepherd here at Crosslink, but it is not only the pastor’s job to disciple the people.

All of our pastors have a part and role to play in the process of discipleship for your growth and development in the Lord, but everyone in Christ also has a part and role to play in the growth and development of others in the Lord. **Ephesians 4:11-13, 15** are wonderful verses to remember. “He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of **the saints for the work** of service, to **the building up of the body** of Christ; until **we all attain** to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ...Speaking the truth in love, **we are to grow up** in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.” In other words, it is our responsibility to teach one another, especially our younger brothers and sisters, so that they can grow in the Lord. And, as we help others grow in the Lord, it also presses us further in our own relationship with the Lord so that we continue to grow as well.

Perhaps you reason, “But Pastor, I don’t know what to say and I don’t know what to do.” Here’s what I encourage you to do. First, make sure that you personally are serious about your own relationship with the Lord. Daily spend time in His Word and ask Him to teach you and lead you. As you make this the priority that it needs to be, God will begin to show you things about Himself that you never knew. Second, connect with another group of believers. In our Discipleship Ministries, we have over 40 groups – Community Groups and EquipU groups that are designed to help you connect with other believers and grow in the Lord. Nobody has every answer and there are some things that we will not know fully until we are in heaven, but until then, there’s a whole lot that we can learn **together** as God intended in community with one another. By the way, we are deceiving ourselves if we call ourselves a disciple of Jesus, but we are not taking the time to learn more about Him and His Word. There is no way that we will disciple others as Christ intended if we are not first a disciple ourselves. We will not give what we do not live.

We are to disciple others by teaching them. Perhaps you conclude that this isn’t for you because you are not a “teacher.” The thought of standing in front of a group of people may terrify you. Again, there’s nothing to worry about here. God may call you to do this, but if He does, He will also gift you for it. But be encouraged, the word for “teacher” means “to instruct, to impart knowledge, to direct.” In other words, many times the greatest instruction and direction comes not from public proclamation, but from personal encouragement and example. ****ILL:** One of the men who most impacted me in high school was a man named Lamar Reaves. For the majority of the time I knew him, he was a basketball coach for an opposing team. The name of the school was Grace, but I hated that team. 😊 I will never forget, though, that after every game he would personally seek me out and encourage me. The more we talked, the more I realized what stood out to me about him was that I truly saw Jesus in him. My senior year I was blessed that he began to teach at my school, and during that time, about once a month or so he would invite me to go to breakfast at a Hardee’s around the corner. We would talk, and visit, and he would share with me a nugget of Scripture that he felt applied to me. It wasn’t his great teaching skills but his genuine walk with Jesus that impacted me. He showed me what the heart of a genuine shepherd looks like. I learned later that he had done this with numerous young men throughout the years, and only eternity will tell the incredible impact that his simple way of encouragement and gentle instruction had on people for Jesus. Friends, never doubt

the impact that your intentional efforts will have when you seek to pour into others and instruct them in the ways of the Lord.

III. The Comfort of the Great Commission (vs. 20)

The power and authority of Jesus is enough to fulfill the Great Commission. The callings He gives us and the way that He clarifies them, they, too, are enough for us to fulfill it. But the Lord is such a good and gentle Shepherd that He leaves them with a final word of great comfort, “And lo (behold, take this in, don’t miss this), I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” I love that Jesus did not simply say I *will* be with you, but I *am* with you in the present tense. In every season, situation, and circumstance, the Lord *is* present with them. What an incredible statement of comfort! Jesus is getting ready to ascend into heaven. He was about to leave them and this certainly grieved them, but Jesus had prepared them for this moment. In **John 16:7** He said, “But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.” The disciples understood that the reference to Jesus’ presence always being with them was referring to the Holy Spirit who would be with them. This did not mean, however, that they would be free of danger or difficulties, but it did mean that everywhere they went on mission for the Lord they could be assured of His constant abiding presence through the Holy Spirit who would be in them. The writer of **Hebrews** probably summarizes this best, **13:5b-6**, “For He (Jesus) Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,’ so that we confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?’ ” The disciples sat in a very uncertain situation. They trusted the Lord, they were comforted by His words, and they would soon go to the upper room to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. While they had a clear calling from the Lord, there were a lot of details that were still unknown. It’s interesting that the Hebrew writer specifically emphasizes that he would not be afraid of what man does to him. I believe this was the collective conviction of these early disciples. They knew that life would not be easy, that persecution and trials would come, but they also knew the mission was more important and that the name of Jesus was the only name that could bring salvation to the lost. Yet, what a comforting word from the Lord to know that He would be with them always, even to the end of the age. This truth though was not simply for them, it is a powerful word of promise to us today. Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Lord is with us always, even to the end of the age. Please understand that this word of *comfort* does not mean that we will always be *comfortable*. The fact that the Lord is with us doesn’t mean that we are shielded from harm, but it does mean that we have a Refuge that we can depend upon. It does mean that we have a Rock when everything around us is shifting. It does mean that we have a Friend that sticks closer than a brother. It does mean that no matter what man brings against us we have the King of kings and Lord of lords on our side. He is with us always, even to the end of the age.

So how does this apply to you today? If you don’t know Jesus as your Savior, I invite you to trust in Him. He left the throne of heaven, laid down His life on a cross, rose again, and today He is in heaven preparing a place for all who believe. Please trust in Him today! For those who are already saved, does your life demonstrate conviction about His authority and power? Are you living to be safe or living to be obedient and trusting in the power and authority of the Lord? Think for a moment about those in your sphere of influence. Who needs to hear the Gospel? What are you doing to share it with them? How do you need to get out of your comfort zone? How are you ministering to the nations right next door? And, what about the people beyond here? What about going on mission to another country to share the hope of Christ? What is your personal role in

taking the Gospel to the billions who have never heard? We are all called to take the Good News to the ends of the earth, but I can't help but wonder today if God is uniquely calling some of you. Is God calling you to surrender your life in full-time service to Him? Is God calling you to be a preacher of the Gospel or a missionary, to spend your life investing the Gospel in a different culture and people? The call is clear, "Go and disciple." Will you answer the call?