

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US (3)

Romans 10:9-17

INTRODUCTION

We need to talk some more about the Great Commission today. We talked about it last Sunday in the context of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost, and the present-day reality of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us and through us as we seek to serve God's purposes in this world in our generation (Acts 13:36).

We began to talk about the Great Commission two Sundays earlier, affirming our mission "to proclaim the gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations" as one of the non-negotiable *Essentials of Our Faith* as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. In its most familiar form, in Matthew 28:19, the Great Commission is to "go and make disciples of all nations." It is expressed in Mark 16:15 as the mission to preach the gospel message to the whole world. In Acts 1:8, it is the mandate given by Jesus to His disciples then and now to be His witnesses, in the power of the Holy Spirit, beginning where we are, on the mission field where we live – in our Jerusalems, expanding in ever-enlarging circles, to our Judeas and Samarias, and extending to the farthest corners of the earth, so that the whole world and everyone in it may know the true and living God, and the salvation He has procured for us through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, our mission is to be ambassadors for Christ, emissaries to whom the gospel message and ministry of reconciliation to God through the saving work of Christ have been entrusted (5:18-21). It is an extraordinarily high calling and an extraordinarily high privilege.

For the fulfillment of this high calling, as we said last week, we are utterly and completely dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, the church can never fulfill its Great Commission. Nor can any of us hope to do our part personally. The fulfillment of the Great Commission depends on the power of the Holy Spirit in us and through us, in and through the church – the same Holy Spirit who came upon Peter and the other apostles and the church in Jerusalem in its infancy in Acts 2. The same Holy Spirit given to the church on the Day of Pentecost has been given to us to be with us and in us, in order to accomplish the church's Great Commission through us, for the glory of God and to the praise of His glorious grace.

With this review as an introduction, let's turn now to the reading of God's Word in Romans 10:9-17, where the apostle Paul talks about the importance of evangelism and explains why evangelism matters. Let us give our full and unreserved attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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DISCIPLE-MAKING AND EVANGELISM

If making disciples is the essence of the Great Commission, it should be intuitively obvious that there is more to the Great Commission than evangelism alone or just sharing with others our faith in Christ. It should be just as obvious that evangelism is an essential component of the Great Commission. It is indispensable. You cannot be a disciple-maker for Christ without sharing the gospel message with those you seek to disciple.

In New Testament terms, a disciple (*mathetes* in Greek) is a student or apprentice who attaches him- or herself to a teacher or rabbi in order to follow the rabbi, to learn from and be trained by the rabbi. The goal of the disciple was not merely to gain knowledge or wisdom, but, in effect, to become like the teacher. That is what Jesus had in mind when He called the 12 original disciples to follow Him, and when He later commissioned them (minus Judas) to go and make disciples of all the nations. As Francis Chan points out, the whole point of being a disciple of Jesus is to imitate Him, to carry on His ministry in the world, and, in the process, to become like Him (Chan, *Multiply*, 16).

But it doesn't end there. Disciples of Jesus are meant to reproduce spiritually. The first disciples of Jesus were commissioned to go out into the world, in the power given by the Holy Spirit, to "win" others who would become what they themselves were – *disciples of Christ*. Robert Coleman writes in his masterpiece, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, that the Great Commission Jesus gave to His disciples was "to build (or train up) people like themselves who were so constrained by the commission of Christ that they not only followed (Him), but also led others to follow His way" (Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 101).

So, you see, the essence of the Great Commission is not evangelism alone. There is more to it than witnessing to others. More to it, even, than making converts. It is about making disciples who not only believe the gospel and place their trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation, but who follow Jesus and bear witness to the amazingness and sufficiency of His grace amid the joys and sorrows, and changes and challenges of life, who seek to live faithfully under His Lordship, who desire to serve His purposes and to live for His glory. It is about making disciples who will make more disciples, on and on, until, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13, "we all reach 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."

Having said this, it must also be said – again – that evangelism is central and absolutely essential to the fulfillment of our Great Commission. Why? Because you cannot be a true disciple or follower of Jesus unless you first believe in Him as the Son of God and the only Savior of sinners, and receive Him as the Savior and Lord of your life. Being a disciple of Jesus is a pre-requisite to being a disciple-maker. And believing in Him is a pre-requisite both to following Him as a disciple and to sharing the gospel message with others in the power of the Holy Spirit.

EVANGELISM DEFINED

Before we examine Paul's explanation in Romans 10 of how and why evangelism matters, maybe we should take a moment to think about the meaning of the word *evangelism*. It is a word that terrifies many of us and offends lots of people in our culture today. It comes from the Greek *evangelion*, which simply means "good news" or "gospel." The message of the gospel, literally, is good news. It is the good news of what God Himself has done through the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of His own Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from the penalty we justly deserve because of our sins, to forgive all our sins and to reconcile us to God, to adopt us as beloved children of our Heavenly Father, and to give us the gift of eternal life – life after death – in the kingdom of heaven. This good news is based not on what we have done, or can and must do to merit God's blessings, but on what God in His mercy and grace has done for us. From start to finish, it is all pure grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like you and me. Which is part of what makes the good news so good. And why we should not be timid or reluctant to share it.

The dictionary defines evangelism as "the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness," or "the preaching or promulgation of the gospel." Not every believer is called by God to the ministry of preaching, in a formal sense, but all of us who believe the gospel message – all of us who confess with our mouth that "Jesus is Lord" and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9) – are called to spread the gospel through our personal witness in the sphere of relationships where God has placed us or wherever He chooses to take us. This means, of course, that the Great Commission isn't meant just for preachers or pastors or missionaries who go to other nations. It is *the church's* commission. It is *our* commission. It belongs to us all. *All of us* have a part to play in it. And it is something that requires more than just our intellectual assent or agreement in principle. It requires our action.

Charles Spurgeon (among others) defined evangelism as "one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread." Many of you have probably heard it before. If not, take a moment to think about it. It highlights the fact that, spiritually speaking, we are all beggars who need the grace only God can provide. We are no better than anyone else. The only difference between us and those who don't know the Lord Jesus in the power of His saving love is that we know Him. We know where to get the "bread" our souls so desperately need.

Here is another, fuller, definition of evangelism, as articulated by Anglican Archbishop William Temple (1881-1944): "To evangelize," he said, "is so to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men (and women) shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His church." (Quoted in Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, 9)

It is a good definition. It emphasizes the fact that the good news – the *evangel* – is all about Jesus, about who He is and what He has done, and about His claim to be the sovereign in our lives.

It emphasizes the fact that, for its effectiveness, evangelism “depends entirely on the work of the Holy Spirit.” We can’t save anyone. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. “It is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit,” writes Michael Green, “to convict people of their need for Christ, to make Him real to them, to bring them to confess that He is Lord, to [incorporate] them into Christ’s body, the church, and to assure them that they belong. All this is the Spirit’s work, not ours. We can speak and challenge, urge and encourage” others to believe the gospel and receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord, “but we are totally unable to bring anyone ‘from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God’ (Acts 26:18). That is God’s sovereign work alone” (Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, 10).

It is a good definition, as well, because, as Michael Green says, it “makes the important point that true evangelism issues in discipleship. It is not simply a matter of proclaiming good news, or of eliciting decisions for Christ, [or] getting hands raised.” It is not simply about growing the church numerically. The goal in evangelism is nothing less than fulfilling the Great Commission and making disciples of Jesus Christ. And evangelism that is truly evangelism issues in a life that is changed from going my way to going Christ’s way ... and to seek to serve Him as our King” – as our wise and loving Heavenly Father and our gracious and almighty Sovereign – “in the fellowship of brother and sister Christians in the church” (Green, 11).

Evangelism, of course, requires communication, which is what Paul means in verse 17, where he says that faith (as a response) comes from hearing the gospel message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ – that is, through the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, crucified Savior, and risen Lord. J. I. Packer describes evangelism as “a work of communication in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God’s message of mercy to sinners” (Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 41).

“Mouthpieces for God’s message of mercy,” His message of forgiveness, of freedom from sin and guilt and shame and condemnation, His message of love and acceptance, of grace and peace “to sinners” for whom Jesus died: This is what God intends us to be. This is the high calling and high privilege that are ours as ambassadors for Christ in our world.

WHY EVANGELISM MATTERS

Now, I want you to notice the force of Paul’s logic in the litany of questions he asks in verses 14 and 15, after declaring in verses 12 and 13 that the way of salvation is the same for both Jews and non-Jews, namely, that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord” in true, trusting faith, “will be saved” (10:13). Verse 13 is a quotation from Joel 2:32, and was also quoted by Peter in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:21.

Here is the flow of Paul’s argument in verses 14 and 15:

Salvation is promised to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus in faith; but who will ever call on His name if they don’t believe in Him?

How can people ever believe in Him if they have never heard of Him and what He did for them?

How can they ever hear the gospel message unless someone tells them, unless someone preaches the good news or simply tells them about Jesus and His love?

How will the message ever get out, how will anyone ever preach the gospel or spread the word about Jesus, unless they are commissioned and sent out in His name?

To look at it from a reverse angle, Paul says it like this:

Unless messengers of the gospel – witnesses or ambassadors for Christ – are commissioned and sent out in Jesus’ name, no one will ever preach the gospel or share their faith with those who desperately need it (which is all of us).

Unless the gospel is preached, unless the gospel message gets disseminated in the world, no one will ever hear about Jesus and His saving love.

Unless people hear the gospel, unless the gospel is communicated to them in a way they can understand, they will never believe the truth of the gospel.

Unless they believe and accept the gospel, they will not call on the Savior.

And unless they call on His name in a spirit of repentance and trusting faith, they will not be saved.

This is the chain of events God has ordained and ordinarily uses to bring unbelievers to saving faith in Christ.

Calling on the Lord for salvation depends on believing.

Believing depends on knowing about Jesus.

Knowing about Him depends on hearing the message.

Hearing depends on someone telling the gospel message.

And the telling of the gospel depends on messengers, witnesses, ambassador, missionaries, and evangelists – mainly, ordinary Christian folks like us – being commissioned and sent by God to spread the word; to plant the seeds of the gospel and to feed and water them; to live lives of love so that people we know or encounter will see and experience God’s love not just in words but in action and in truth; to tell whomsoever will listen what Jesus has done for us; and to invite everyone who will to trust in Jesus and to join us in the adventure of becoming and making disciples.

This is *the Great Commission*. This is *the church's* commission. It is *my* commission. It is *your* commission. It is *our* commission.

HOW TO HELP FULFILL THE GREAT COMMISSION

There are different ways, of course, to help in fulfilling the Great Commission.

You can help by serving on a short-term mission team or as a longer-term missionary in a foreign mission field or somewhere in the U. S. where there is a great need.

You can help by praying for missionaries serving around the world.

You can pray for the people and people groups among whom our missionaries labor for the gospel.

You can pray for unreached people groups among whom no Christian church with even a handful of known Christians exists – such as the unreached or unengaged people groups in the North Caucasus region of Russia, the region “adopted” by our presbytery, the EPC Presbytery of the East, with the vision of sending a missionary team to make Christ known and to establish His church there.

You can help to fulfill the Great Commission as well by giving financially – giving freely, cheerfully, generously, even sacrificially – to support our missionaries in their kingdom work and provide resources to send out more missionary laborers into the fields.

YOUR MISSION FIELD

You can help in the Great Commission by serving God on your mission field right here where you live, where you work, where you go to school, where you work out or hang out.

If you serve in the military (thank you!), your mission field is the place of duty to which you have been assigned. At least in part.

If you work in some capacity in government, your place of service is your mission field. At least in part.

If you're a teacher or school administrator, your sphere of influence and relationships is your mission field. At least in part.

If you're in school, that is where your mission field is. At least in part.

If you live in a retirement community, you know where your mission field is. At least in part.

If you're a government contractor or work in the private sector, your mission field includes your customers, colleagues, and employees. At least in part.

If you're a medical professional, your mission field is the medical field in which you serve. At least in part.

If you're a stay-at-home mom (or dad), if you are a childcare provider, if you care for a grandchild, or if you care for an aging parent or spouse who requires a great deal of attention, that is where your mission field is. At least in part.

For most of us, our mission field also includes our neighbors, as well as the members of our family.

A FEW THINGS I'M SURE OF

I'm not an expert when it comes to evangelism or the Great Commission. But there are a few things I'm sure of. One thing I'm sure of is that there is no evangelistic program, method, technique or formula that is guaranteed to work every time or to produce the results we desire to see. I'm just as sure that, whatever our plan or method, we need to bathe our efforts to share the gospel with others and to make disciples in the name of Jesus who will themselves become disciple-makers in lots and lots of prayer.

Another thing I'm sure of is that if we are trusting in *our own efforts* – *our* strategies, programs, methods, techniques, and magic formulae – instead of depending on the grace and power of the Spirit to do His work in and through us, we will never have the impact for Christ and His kingdom we want to have.

Still another thing I'm sure of is that if we don't really love those with whom we seek to share the gospel, we might as well forget about it. We must love people with the same kind of love with which Jesus loved – and loves – us. We must love them where they are, just as they are, not as we want them to be. Our love for them, like the love of Jesus for us, must be unflappable and unstoppable.

Here is one more thing I'm sure of: In order to do our part to carry out the Great Commission, we cannot remain silent about Jesus and His saving love. We just can't. We must be willing to step out in faith and speak up in response to the nudges and openings the Holy Spirit gives us to share even just a bit of what God has done for us, or to tell someone who doesn't know Him about what a Friend, what a great and gracious Savior we have in Jesus. Speak up. And do it in love.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.