

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 2, 2011**

## **A NEW YEAR'S COMMISSION**

### **Matthew 28:16-20**

There is a legend about the return of Jesus to glory after His time on earth. He bore the marks of His cruel cross and shameful death. The angel Gabriel approached Him and asked, "Master, do they know all about how you loved them and what you did for them?"

"No," replied Jesus, "not yet. Right now only a handful of people in Palestine know."

Gabriel was perplexed. "Then what have you done to let everyone know about your love for them?"

Jesus said, "I've asked my eleven disciples and a few others to tell people about me. Those who are told will tell others, and my story will be spread throughout the earth. Ultimately, all mankind will know about my love."

Gabriel frowned and looked rather skeptical. He well knew what poor stuff people were made of. He said, "But what if Peter denies you again? What if they all run away again in the face of opposition? What if Peter and James and John grow weary? What if the people who come after them forget? What if way down in the twenty-first century people just don't tell others about you? Do you have another plan?"

Jesus answered, "No. I have just one plan. I am counting on them."

That is what our text is about. During the advent season, Pastor Neil preached from the first part of the Gospel of Matthew. I think it appropriate as we begin the New Year, to examine a passage at the end of Matthew. Often called the Great Commission, it lays out the plan that Jesus had to share the good news to the whole world. Let's look at this passage together.

### **THE SETTING OF THE GREAT COMMISSION: A MOUNTAIN IN GALILEE**

It begins with a simple statement that we often gloss over: *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.* There's a lot packed into this verse.

First, the eleven disciples – the original Twelve, minus Judas who betrayed Jesus for a few pieces of silver and hanged himself – are the ones going to Galilee. It is just after the resurrection of Christ. A glance at the verses preceding our passage will bear that out. Mary Magdalene and other women go to the garden tomb only to find it empty. An angel shows them that Jesus has risen from the dead! As they leave, Jesus appears to them, and they bow down and worship . . . a natural response to the Risen Lord.

Jesus then says something that may seem a bit peculiar. These women are to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen, and they are to leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee. That should be no surprise

to the Eleven. Just after the Last Supper, Jesus told them, as is recorded in Matthew 26:32, “But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” The thrust of this statement shows that something important would happen in Galilee, after the resurrection.

The disciples were to go to a place in Galilee already designated by Jesus. It was a mountain, perhaps it was the location of the Sermon on the Mount or the place where Jesus appointed the Twelve to follow Him. We don’t know.

This appearance on that Galilean mountainside was one of about a dozen or so times Jesus appeared after He rose from the grave. Those appearances confirmed who He said He was – God Himself – and that the gospel message is real. Without the resurrection, the Christian faith would be nothing more than a giant hoax.

I want you to catch the sense of anticipation that Jesus must have felt when He tells His closest friends to go to Galilee after His resurrection and to meet up with the Risen Lord a special time and place. Jesus had something exciting, wonderful, and important to tell them, a command that when obeyed would be life-changing.

### **THE COMMAND OF THE GREAT COMMISSION: MAKE DISCIPLES**

What was this command? Jesus tells His disciples to *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.* This is what we commonly call the Great Commission. Let’s briefly unpack this sentence.

Jesus’ command is to “make disciples.” That’s the imperative to which Jesus calls the Eleven. Make disciples! They are disciples of Jesus themselves and the Lord wants them to reproduce themselves by helping others become disciples of Jesus, too. That command begs the question, “So, what is a disciple?”

The word “disciple” simply means a follower, a pupil. It is related to the word “discipline” in a positive sense as one who learns and masters the discipline or way of life of his teacher. We read in John 8:31: “*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.*” A disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who is always learning, always growing in his knowledge of Jesus.

A disciple is a follower as well as a learner. Knowledge of the Bible does not make one a disciple. A true disciple is one who has willingly turned away from other ambitions and commits his or her life to Christ. The Gospel tells us, “*Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14:27). Every believer must turn away from sin (we call this repentance) and from any dependence he has on his own efforts to find favor with God. He relies only on the work of Christ on the Cross of Calvary to save him from the punishment he deserves for his sins. A disciple, a real disciple, is one who every day is in dependence on Christ and strives to follow Christ in every sphere of his life.

A disciple also bears fruit; John 15:8 says: “*This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*” This fruit is in the form of a life shaped by the

Holy Spirit, the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – all traits that demonstrate that the disciple’s character is increasingly being formed into Christ-likeness. Fruit also can mean those people who the Lord has brought to Himself, using you as an instrument in His hands.

Let me pause and ask you: Are you a disciple? Do you spend time in the Word of God so that you are growing in your knowledge of Christ?

Does your lifestyle – in public and in private – demonstrate that you follow Jesus every day of the week and not just on Sunday?

Are you different in character and attitude than you were this time last year? That is, has the Holy Spirit changed you over the course of the last twelve months?

Do your conversations include Jesus, where you tell other people about the gospel? These are questions we need to ask ourselves. The beginning of the New Year is a good time to start.

In the Great Commission, Jesus tells us “how” we are to go about making disciples. By going, baptizing, and teaching.

The disciples were to go into the entire world and tell people about Jesus. Followers of Jesus were to evangelize the nations, to bear witness of Christ to every people group. Jim Boice wrote:

Whenever the church does this it has prospered. When it has failed to do this it has stagnated and dried up. Why? Because discipleship demands evangelism; it is an aspect of our obedience as Christ’s followers, and Jesus blesses obedience. If we are following Jesus, we will go to others for whom He died. A disobedient church is one that does not evangelize, begins to dry up or even dies (*The Gospel of Matthew: An Expositional Commentary, Vol. 2*).

That little word “go” tells us that we evangelize by going to those who do not know Jesus; NOT by asking them to come to us. For example, disciples are to go to the unbelieving world as foreign missionaries. Certainly, missions are included in the Great Commission.

Disciples go to the unbelieving world around them – neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, friends and family. The people around us are just as unreached as those in faraway lands. Very rarely will an unbeliever darken the doors of a church. The people who visit us are, by and large, fellow Christians. The non-Christians are not inclined to come to us; we must to go to them!

Romans 10:14 tells us:

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching [literally, proclaiming Jesus] to them?*

In your various spheres of influence – where you work, where you play, the places where you socialize – are people that God has given to you. I cannot reach them because I don’t know

them. Same goes for our Community Outreach Committee. If your friends and neighbors are to hear the gospel, you have to be the one to share it. Will you go?

The second means by which we make disciples is to baptize. So what did Jesus mean when He said to baptize in the context of the Great Commission? To answer, we need to understand what baptism is and what it signifies.

Earlier in his gospel, Matthew records the words of John the Baptist: *“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”* (Mat 3:11).

Baptism is both a physical act involving the pouring or dipping of water, and a spiritual act of the Holy Spirit, bringing the believer into the fellowship of the church. Paul writes: *“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink”* (1 Cor. 12:13).

Baptism refers to both the physical act of dipping into water and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit into the believer (regeneration). Just like circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism is a sign that one is brought into the covenant family by the grace of God. The physical act of baptism, whether of an infant or of someone old enough to decide for himself, is efficacious – that is, a symbol of salvation – only when the spiritual regeneration occurs.

Therefore the command to make disciples by baptizing meant people were brought into the covenant family, with all the benefits of being in community with other believers. Jesus signified that discipleship must include the community aspect of authentic fellowship with the saints.

The final way Jesus says we are to make disciples is by teaching others what Jesus has commanded us. That is, we teach others Scripture, because *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work* (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Disciples are to know their Bibles more and more; if they fail to be students of the Word of God, we may lead ourselves and others astray.

Now there is a variety of ways we may teach. Sometimes we teach from the pulpit, or in the Sunday school classroom. Sometimes we teach in a small group. God has so equipped the church with some people who are given the gift of teaching.

But we teach in other ways, too. Through our conversations with others, through what we do and say, how we interact with other people. In every word we say, we have some degree of influence on those who hear – large or small, good or bad. We are really teaching every hour that we are awake. To influence others so that they are being made into disciples means that thinking must be soaked by Scripture, so that our words speak truth.

The Great Commission is for us if we want to truly be disciples of Jesus. Jim Boice summarized this nicely:

These words are for you if you have turned from your sin to trust Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. If you have done that, then you are to work with other Christians to lead people to faith through the preaching and teaching of the gospel, bring them into fellowship through the sacrament of baptism, and within that fellowship, continue to teach all that Jesus has commanded. (*The Gospel of Matthew: An Expositional Commentary, Vol. 2*).

### **THE BASIS OF THE GREAT COMMISSION: CHRIST'S AUTHORITY**

You may be saying to yourself, “Yeah, right, pastor! I know I’m supposed to obey the Great Commission, but you don’t know my neighbors, my co-workers, my classmates. They are impossible to reach for Christ! It’s no use.” You – and I – are in good company. Look at how the disciples responded when Jesus met them on that Galilean mountain:

The resurrected Christ appeared and the disciples naturally fell to their knees and worshipped Him. Some, however, doubted, they were hesitant, uncertain. The disciples may have wondered:

How do we know that other people will respond to our words? After all, the authorities killed Jesus, who was far better able to persuade men than we are !.

How will we know that those who are baptized into our fellowship are actually believers? Judas was numbered among us, but he turned out to be a traitor.

How will we know that people understand and apply what we teach? If it depends on our talent and skill or favorable circumstances, why bother to try? When you have an opportunity to tell others about Jesus, do you ever feel like the disciples did?

That’s why Jesus countered their doubts – and ours – by speaking of His authority: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*. Matthew tells us in other parts of this book that Jesus taught with authority, that He had authority over nature and exercised that authority in His teaching and healing ministry. The Eleven, who were brought up on the Hebrew Scriptures, would undoubtedly be familiar with Daniel 7:13-14, a passage to which Jesus alludes in the Great Commission:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man [Jesus], coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. <sup>14</sup> 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.

But what is so special about the authority given in Matthew 28:18? What is the difference between this authority and that which is mentioned elsewhere in the Gospels?

Before the resurrection, there was a divine limit to the extent of this authority. People were healed, but later died. A few were raised from the dead, but would die later. But after the

crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus could give forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This kind of authority was not an abstract thought but was made real by the very fact that Jesus stood before the disciples alive! Authority was given over death; to give eternal life to those who were (are) dead in their sins.

Jesus had authority over the heavens. That's a reference to the spiritual world that includes demonic powers. You may recall Ephesians 12: "*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*" If Jesus has authority over Satan and all of his minions, He has power over those demonic forces that stand in the way of the people you and I hope to reach for Christ. The enemy of our souls – and those of our friends and neighbors – has been defeated. Our evangelism has a guarantee – everyone who God has chosen, before the foundations of the world, will understand and believe the gospel.

Secondly, Jesus has authority over the earth. Among other things, and in the context of the Great Commission, He has authority over the death of human beings. Jesus rose from the grave! What more proof do you need to believe that death has been defeated? He defeated the death of our bodies and the death of our souls. He has conquered the spiritual death every human has because of their transgressions and sins, when they followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

I think that this is what excited Jesus as He told the disciples to meet Him in Galilee after His resurrection. He would commission them to tell others about Him, with the full knowledge that power rested not in the disciples but in the proven fact of the crucifixion and resurrection.

In other words, making disciples of all the nations was possible because of the resurrection. God regenerates the hearts of men and women who are dead in their sins, and through regeneration gives them the ability to respond to Christ's offer of forgiveness. He saves people; we are simply His instruments who have been given a gracious opportunity to be part of the process.

The Great Commission ends with the promise that Jesus will always be with us – something that is possible only because He has risen from the dead. In fact the Gospel of Mathew begins and ends with what I like to call the Immanuel Principle. *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which means, God with us* ( Matthew 1:23). Throughout the Bible, the Lord says: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people." God sovereignly sets apart a people for Himself, to redeem them, and to dwell among them.

It is with this truth that Jesus arms His disciples throughout the ages, the reality of His authority and His presence. Accomplishing the Great Commission does not happen because of the skill and adequacy of His disciples, but in the fact that He has risen and defeated death. Because He has risen from the dead, He is able to come alongside His disciples every day, everywhere; if He were still dead and in the grave, He couldn't do this.

That means that the sheer impossibility of disciples like you and me to actually re-produce ourselves spiritually has been overcome by the Risen Lord. We are to fulfill His commission to

make disciples, by realizing that since He rose from the dead He is always with us, and has authority and power over the very death that keeps men and women from becoming disciples.

So friends, in 2011, fulfill your commission! Jesus' plan to reach the nations is for you and I to make disciples. Don't be afraid or shy about telling others about your Savior. Don't be afraid that people will ignore your message. The Great Commission is for us.

Jesus is alive! His authoritative power ensures that He is with us and that His plan will be accomplished.