

A Tree that Multiplies: The Church's Mission **Matthew 28:18–20**

In the summer months of 2001, God plucked my wife and I from the eastern Kentucky foothills of the Smoky Mountains to situate us inside the stifling heat of the Mid-South. I was transitioning from Bible College to Seminary life. And coming from a Kentucky Baptist college connected to Southern Baptists, missions—especially foreign missions—sat near the top of the school's priorities. In fact, missions, from the leadership to the students, was the constant refrain. Jessica and I heard more than our share of chapel preachers speak on Isaiah 6, "*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'"*" We were thankful for the emphasis.

But there was clearly a disconnect between the school and the church we attended those last two years of college. In fact, the prevailing approach seemed to be, "Leave it up to the colleges and seminaries to equip and set apart missionaries. We just need to focus on who is in front of us." In fact, when we told the church we were serving our international intentions for missionary service, that's precisely what one man who raised his hand said, "What about the people here? Why would you go across the world when there's so much need here?"

As we began to acclimate ourselves to this new fellowship called South Woods, we learned in pretty short order that this man's sentiment was not this church's. This church and her leaders interpreted "***go therefore and make disciples of all nations***" as something that required commitment on both a personal and communal level. We had heard and began to witness that an unusually high percentage of church members took this commitment seriously, serving on trips to South America, Romania, Ukraine, France, etc. We soon learned of a curious offering called "2Per," an ongoing collection earmarked for mission efforts only. Then, while we hunkered down here for the long haul, South Woods entered a season where missions and missionaries of Central Asia became our chief focus, even sending a couple of families overseas in line with that focus. Not too long after that, we made another healthy shift, acting on the belief that far away was not more important than nearby. With our Mercy for Memphis efforts beginning around 2013, we put to practice that conviction by prioritizing our city and our neighborhoods as a point of emphasis for our witness to the world. These outward postures aren't simply extracurricular, something only for staff to do or plan. Intentional gospel witness shining into a gospel-starved world has been and is a part of the DNA of this fellowship.

What's created and keeps shaping this longstanding identity we're attempting to preserve under the Lord? Well, we're a tree planted by streams of water. God has granted us delight in His life-giving Word which is directing our desire to conform our lives together under what God prioritizes in His Word. Today, we have such a text that fuels our pursuit to be faithful witnesses "*to the end of the earth.*"¹

I. What Jesus Possesses

As we seek to understand this commission, the whole of Matthew's Gospel helps us make sense of it. A lineage that astonishes. Prophecies fulfilled to a tee. A virgin has a baby. This baby grows

¹ Acts 1:8

in favor and stature with God and man. Then Matthew writes of the astonishing deeds of this anointed King and His timeless teachings, full of arresting images and illuminating wisdom. Then, like the other Gospel writers, Matthew gives more real estate per capita to this promised Savior's passion/sufferings, and for good reason. And finally, Matthew records the truth that Mary's son, Jesus of Nazareth, conquered the grave and all evil through the power of His indestructible life. Jesus is indeed the exact radiance of the glory of God.²

Yet, the glory of Christ does not electrify the average person walking down the street. We saw it do that to Angelica over the past few months, but to no surprise, some are indifferent to or in opposition to the Christ of scripture. In fact, this kind of blindness is a central reason why Jesus gave us this charge, this commission, this expectation of not only living for Him from a devoted heart but engaging His cause to spread His message and glory. And, "...*How are they to believe in Him of whom they've never heard?*"³ These directives of Christ aren't optional for those who have been miracle-ized by grace. In fact, brothers and sisters, living and speaking as a witness to His work and person are ongoing family expectations until every eye sees Him in the clouds. Yet, as you will see, majesty lurks underneath the responsibilities we carry.

Verse 18, ***And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."*** All the weight of Matthew's testimony is funneled to this moment. Jesus is speaking as a Man risen from the dead. In fact, this declaration by Jesus was long foreshadowed. What He states is an echo of what God promised a few centuries prior, whether it's God promising to Moses "*another prophet*" to whom they must listen or God informing David that another King would sit on an eternal throne.⁴ Or perhaps a text like Daniel 7. Consider Daniel's words, "*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. [14] And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*"⁵ There, a Son of man receives an everlasting dominion, an indestructible kingdom from One called "*the Ancient of Days.*" And we know from Jesus' teaching that "son of man" is the sugar-stick designation for Himself throughout His ministry.

A few weeks ago, Jessica and I were listening to something by Sinclair Ferguson. He likened the Old Testament to a chamber room that is richly furnished but dimly lit. He expressed that the insertion of light brings into the room nothing that was not there before, but the light clarifies much of what is present and what was not seen beforehand. You see, when we look back at what Daniel wrote, a Son of man receives an everlasting dominion, an indestructible kingdom from One called "*the Ancient of Days.*" The Holy Spirit shines a light on this character and helps us to know that we're seeing the fulfillment of what Daniel saw—this son of man is Jesus the Christ. In fact, it's Jesus' sugar-stick designation for Himself throughout His ministry. So, this one in Daniel is nothing less than a God who reveals Himself as Emmanuel—Christ the divine Son, who in time and space, became one of us. He is the sovereign, self-sustaining, eternal King of kings. His resurrection was the vindication of His work to save sinners, but it was also the end of the limitations that He willingly embraced throughout His life and ministry. The days of Jesus being

² Hebrews 1:3

³ Romans 10:14

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:15, 2 Samuel 7:16, Psalm 89:3-4

⁵ Daniel 7:13-14

the “*man of sorrows*” who was “*acquainted with grief...stricken and afflicted*” by the Father were now experientially over. ***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me***, Jesus declared. Jesus in essence says, “I’m in charge of the universe, and I will continue with infinite power and limitless authority to build my church through the witness of My disciples.”

We’re meant to see here that there is no one like Jesus. One author wrote,

When we read the Bible, we can identify with almost every character. Some of them are better than us, others seemingly worse. Yet we can project ourselves into either persona. But there is one singular and surpassing exception. In Christ we encounter a figure who is at once one with us and yet apart from us, who inspires admiration and defies emulation.⁶ He has fellow feeling without loss of firmness, and familiarity without hint of complicity. He can speak to the level of a child, yet with a reserve of subtlety that leaves the keenest listener out of his depth. No other figure, in either fact or fiction, covers such a range and or strikes such a balance, for in Him we witness perfect manhood and perfect Godhood conjoined in one peerless person.⁷

Jesus alone knows all, sees all, and does all He pleases. The wording ***in heaven and on earth*** express a comprehensive authority, a supreme supremacy.⁸ The seemingly infinite number of galaxies in space are under Him, but no less are the number of hairs on your head.⁹ And more to the point, Jesus reigns over your mission efforts on your very street, and the mission we share together as faithful witnesses to His transforming grace.

But I want us to see something important about the order of what Jesus is saying here: These truths about Jesus’ authority and power must be understood first, before the demands He makes. For, this is a normal, biblical rhythm. The conviction in us of what is true in His Person must precede what is attempted by us in His strength. Why? Because vertical worship is the springboard of horizontal witness. We love our neighbor best when God holds first place in our hearts. And, this comprehensive authority over every living and non-living thing rises to primary significance in light of the monumental task which follows.

II. What Jesus Prioritizes

Look what He commands beginning in verse 19, ***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*** There are two errors made when people seek to understand what Jesus is communicating here, and I hinted at them in the opening. One, some place the emphasis on the word ***go***, as if true ministry and disciple making were always situated in another place, another land, and in another culture. You could see how an individual or a church might overlook the lost man living two blocks from where the local church gathers each Sunday. Or how missionary service might be exalted to a higher status of service than the “regular” believers in any given fellowship. That’s simply not true, as Kevin and Edinéia Millard, Daniel and Kristen Lowry, or Joe and Bekky Accardo would gladly testify.

⁶ I would say “perfect” emulation. 1 John 2:6, “*Whoever says he abides in [Christ] ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*”

⁷ Steve Hays, as quoted in *Theology for Ministry* (Chapter 24, Missions: The Magnetic Person of Jesus Christ), 471.

⁸ Charles Quarles, EBTC: Matthew, 761.

⁹ Matthew 10:30

But the second error is to simply and only focus on God's work wherever He has placed you. To never consider God's work in the larger world is to turn away from the truth that the earth is the Lord's and everyone in it.¹⁰ That all peoples need the forgiveness found at the cross. The words ***all nations*** is meant to push our efforts beyond our own nation, our own people, our own neighborhood block. Do you see? This is why we pray for the Ashkenazi peoples in Kazakhstan on a given Sunday morning, and why we serve the elementary teachers a football field length away from our sanctuary. It's why we give money to the Manleys situated in the middle of Islamic lostness, and why the Spirit won't leave you alone about your own neighbor's lostness. We're to prioritize both because none are outside the category of ***all nations***.

But maybe I've run ahead of myself. What does it mean to ***make disciples***? Well, it means first that we tell people the good news that has dramatically changed us. That's the personal responsibility. You must be gospel-washed to be qualified in disciple-making. It's not your family, your wealth, your influence, or your abilities that define you most precisely. It is the good news of Jesus bearing all your sin away, which is precisely what is communicated in the task of ***baptizing*** new followers of Christ. The normative practice for Jesus' disciples is that when someone else expresses repentant faith in Him, they are to experience with their bodies and with water a picture of what has happened internally. Jesus said it this way in John 5, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.*" That's what was projected with Angelica earlier. ***In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*** she was brought up from the watery grave, a sign that she is alive unto God and righteousness. Chosen and loved by the Father, purchased by the death of the Son, and raised up to life anew by the Holy Spirit—all of God is now for all of His people!

Furthermore, making disciples extends beyond the initial acts of personal evangelism and baptism. The church together must come alongside new believers to teach them what it means to hold firm to what is true. Others are to be taught by us ***to observe all that*** Jesus has ***commanded*** us. That happens formally, through pastors and teachers, in preaching, in classes, through conferences. And we must learn to listen and live under the voice of the Living Christ's Word. Why? Because false voices exist everywhere—through our digital spaces, news media, publications, podcasts, and in my own heart deceptions can run unashamedly free and deep. The disciple will need to be firmly rooted in the teachings of the faith. Rest assured that the world, the flesh, and the devil have their own curricula, their own orthopraxy.

But all believers—new and old—don't just learn how to follow Christ in formal contexts. We should also view discipleship as something we should purpose to happen as life unfolds. You might recall how God instructed Israel in Deuteronomy 6, "*[The words] that I command you today shall be on your heart. [7] You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*" In some ways, as people come into Christ as new disciples, they are infants in regard to the faith. They need to see lives that are anchored to the scriptures and they need to know how the scriptures relate to every compartment of their lives at all times. And it is the responsibility of the whole church to invest in the holiness of all her members, not just the pastors and teachers.

¹⁰ Psalm 24:1, 89:11

It's daunting to think of you as one person making a mark for Christ in this world. And it can also seem next to impossible for a local church to make a mark for Christ in such a big world to tell of such a big God and a big gospel that saves big sinners. But these disciples in Matthew 28 weren't spiritual giants with superhero capes tailored by angels. They were ordinary men and women who fumbled relationships and gospel opportunities, too. Yet, they kept trying and kept meeting and kept believing in the good news and repenting of their sins and living according to the scriptures because this Jesus commanding was worthy of their lives. They experienced the daily grind of attempting to make disciples as we do. It's not all mind-blowing conversions and spiritual fireworks. Following Jesus is sometimes excruciatingly difficult. But it's also an adventure worth daily dying for. The disciple is on a lifelong course of discovering more of God Himself, His nature, His works, His deep, satisfying well of salvation. It is more than this, but certainly not less than. I read a few weeks back that it would take an hour for a rock released over the Mariana ocean trench to eventually reach bottom. It's 7 miles below the Pacific Ocean. There is no bottom, no exhausting a knowledge of God and His glory. If the whole church is involved in teaching each other what God has done in the planning, sending, teaching, dying, and rising of His Son, then the discipleship adventure we're on together will never hit bottom! The three-in-one Lord is infinitely fascinating and cannot be exhausted in our knowledge of Him.

III. What Jesus Promises

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. The breathtaking promise is before us. It's not "*I will be with you,*" whenever you venture out in My name to make disciples, but "*I am with you always.*" How comforting! *With us.* Present tense. But not like the buttons on my jacket. But with us as in *in us*, by the Spirit, who helps us groan for the redemption of our bodies and pray when we can't utter a word. *In us*, discerning all things about us, understanding every trial and trouble and specifically the troubles which come with bearing His name to those who like their name just fine; troubles which come upon those who bear the gospel of His absolute sufficiency to those who often think they are enough.

There's an abiding, ever-present Lord with us when we fail and when we succeed; when we see His hand at work for blessing and when His hand is veiled in wisdom; when we are content and when we are suffering for His cause in the world; when everything seems to be blossoming and when everything seems to be withering. Jesus is our constant friend and companion, and this promise is meant to embolden us in the task of bearing witness to His death and resurrection.

The Holy Spirit never stops mediating to us the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹ The Spirit is always assuring us of His incomparable life and love. And these disciples, and you disciples will need this abiding assurance by the Spirit as you go and aim at seeing others mature in Christ. Again, why? We might scatter at the first sign of opposition; that's why! But assured of Him, we may stand firm. Why else do we need assured? We're selfish, and self-preserving. But the Spirit can assure us and compel us forward by the love of Christ shed abroad into our hearts. Don't we want others to taste the same? And, why else is assurance needed? Because we meet with pain and misery all over the place, and it can leave us disheartened in our efforts. William Shakespeare hauntingly underscored the human predicament when he wrote,

¹¹ Peter Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens*, 81-82.

Each new morn...

New widows howl, new orphans cry,
New sorrows strike heaven on the face.¹²

We live in a world of incredible sorrows. One of those is that when we share this good news, Satan's blinders sometimes go up. To witness the refusal of living water and the bread of life is its own kind of gripping sorrow that many of you have experienced, too. But when we witness this refusal with harsh resistance and even with hatred, this promise of Jesus becomes even more precious.

Conclusion

What exactly does a sovereign Christ with such a monumental command mean for South Woods, a place and a people that might seem so small and insignificant to others? Well, one thing it means is that we never stop thinking globally. Who we're partnering with around the world—we don't let that smolder out. All of us, let's keep getting behind gospel work beyond our own borders. Gather and give towards it. Pray for the work. Get to know the names and the peoples thousands of miles away. Communicate your brotherly love to them with one of the many means we have these days of communicating. They are serving the same Jesus with the same authority and the same command to live as disciple makers.

And, such a command from such a Savior means that we never stop strategizing to love those closest to us—the neighbor, the schoolteacher, the clerk at Whole Foods, etc. And, since these pronouns *you* in verse 20 are plural, there is something expressly corporate about our witness. We certainly give voice to the risen Lord when we come together to worship his name each Lord's Day.¹³ But our corporate efforts at telling of Him and showing Him through loving service serves this way as well. Let's not grow weary in doing this kind of good.

The comprehensive authority and power declared here should matter a great deal in our kingdom efforts. The promise of that kind of Friend living in us as we testify to His greatness and grace should energize us to spread His fame to those near and those far. For, what Jesus possesses, what Jesus prioritizes, and what Jesus promises have been changing the landscape of this world for millennia. This text is calling us all to join His new-creation work. We could have no better Companion with and in us, as He builds a kingdom. And there's no reason to attempt it in our own strength. Here's God's multiplication project: "*[The mustard seed is] the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*"¹⁴ God won't have cedars and redwoods testifying, but the overlooked and the weak. What good news for our own involvement in the growth of His kingdom!¹⁵ Such is the wisdom from heaven.

He plants. He grows. He multiplies. And He urges us on to be faithful in His work. The power is God's, and the privilege is ours.

¹² William Shakespeare, *MacBeth*, Act 4: Scene 3. Spoken by Macduff. As quoted by Tim Keller in *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, pg. 2.

¹³ David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 653.

¹⁴ Matthew 13:31-32

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

