

The Great Commission

Jesus's life, death, and resurrection should affect every day of your life. During His short time on earth, Jesus challenged the religious leaders and their assumptions about what it meant to please God. He showed us what God intends humanity to look like, and tore down every barrier that would keep us from being the people God made us to be. Jesus's mission on earth was to see God's power, love, and healing permeate every aspect of this broken world and our broken lives. He came to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. One day, Jesus will return to finish this task, to take all things and make them new (Rev. 21:5). But in the meantime, He has given us a mission to accomplish.

The Mission of the Church

In every way, Jesus was what the world had been waiting for. He was the answer for all of Israel's hopes and the embodiment of God's plan of redemption. Nothing could be more important for this world than Jesus's mission on earth. As the disciples began to recognize that Jesus truly was the Christ, the Messiah, they must have seen the importance of what Jesus was doing. Imagine how surprised and disappointed they must have been, then, when Jesus died. And imagine how their excitement must have hit an all-time high when He rose from the grave! This mission to restore the world was back in motion. Jesus could now assume Israel's throne and rule the world in righteousness and peace. But that's not how the story goes. At least, not immediately. Instead of wrapping up human history then and there, Jesus gave His disciples an all-important task: Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18–20) What exactly should the church be doing? The answer has been the same since the day Jesus spoke these words. Sure, each church will have some distinctives, and the church in different places and in different times has had some unique issues that it has needed to address. But the church has one mission. It is the mission that characterized Jesus's ministry on earth, and it is the mission that He left to the church when He returned to His Father. Our mission on this planet is spelled out here in the "Great Commission." We are called to spread Christ's rule on earth through making disciples. We share the good news of a King who conquered death, and who calls every part of His creation to submit to His benevolent reign. This is what Jesus taught His followers to pray for (Matt. 6:10) and it is the reality He calls us to work toward here on earth.

Q1 Read Luke 24 and Acts 1:1–11. As you read, place yourself in the scene and try to feel the significance of these events. How do the circumstances surrounding the Great Commission add significance to Jesus's words?

The Authority of Jesus

In order to more fully understand what we are called to do here on earth, we will analyze the Great Commission in this session. As Jesus delivered this command to His followers, He began with a very important statement: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18). Here we have the foundation for the Great Commission. We serve a King who has absolute authority over every square inch of creation. This authority extends not only to animals,

plants, and weather patterns, but also to every human being on the planet. Understanding this truth should give us confidence as we move out into a world that is opposed to God's reign. Since all authority belongs to Jesus Christ, we are obligated to obey the Great Commission. The command is clear. But this is about more than cold obedience. The King who commands us to make disciples is the same King who sacrificed Himself to give us life. It is our pleasure to serve this King, and we should find joy in submitting to His will. Furthermore, it should not be enough that we ourselves enjoy a healed relationship with our King; we should want every person on earth to experience this great salvation.

A Worldwide Mission

Though Jesus entered a specific culture in a specific part of the world, He is more than a local religious figure. Jesus is the Savior given by God for all people, regardless of race, nationality, or any other distinction. And because every person on the planet has rebelled against God (Rom. 3:23), everyone needs the salvation that Jesus offers. Because of this, Jesus calls His church to move out into every corner of the world with this one and only hope of healing and salvation: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus first gave the Great Commission to the early disciples. They took this task seriously, and spread the gospel throughout much of the known world within a relatively short amount of time. Yet the task of taking the gospel to all peoples did not end with them. This worldwide mission belongs to the church, and it ought to characterize our efforts today. There is no denying that the task of taking the gospel to the nations is massive. There are a lot of people in this world, and a huge percentage of them have no way of even hearing about the gospel. And don't forget about your family members, friends, and coworkers who reject the claims of Christ. Thankfully, we aren't alone in this supernatural task. Making disciples is ultimately God's work, and He will accomplish it in His power. But God's commitment to His plan of redemption does not absolve us from our responsibility to obey His commands. God will reach every corner of this world, and He has chosen to accomplish this task by working through His church.

Q2 We can get so caught up in our own personal relationships with God that we forget to think about the global implications of the Great Commission. Why is it important to see the mission of the church as a global calling?

The Call to Make Disciples

With the Great Commission, we are back to where we started in Part I. It all comes down to making disciples. But now we can see that disciple making is rooted in God's plan of redemption. It is central to God's heart for His people, for His world. As we have said, a disciple is simply a follower of Jesus. If we believe that Jesus is who He says He is and we do what He tells us to do, then we are disciples. So the process of disciple making amounts to telling other people about Jesus and calling them to follow Him as well. Discipleship is a lifelong process where we are continuously made more and more like Jesus. Jesus said that in making disciples of all nations, we are to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to teach them to obey all that He commanded (Matt. 28:19–20). The first step for those who choose to follow Christ and have been transformed by His Spirit, then, is to identify with Christ through being baptized. Just as Jesus was buried in the earth and then raised up into new life, so the new

Christian is “buried” under the water in baptism and brought up again as a symbol of the new life he or she has received. Baptism also initiates the new believer into Christ’s church where he or she becomes a member of a local body of believers. This initial step is nonnegotiable. It is a command of Jesus Christ, and we should consider it a privilege to identify with Jesus and His people through baptism. Who could put their trust in such an amazingly gracious Savior and not want to identify with Him? One result of Jesus’s command to teach others to obey all that He commanded is the New Testament itself. These gospel accounts and letters were written to believers in various churches in order to tell them more clearly who Jesus was and to deliver ongoing instruction on living as followers of Christ in a hostile world. Salvation is not like receiving a train ticket to heaven, where the ticket gets us aboard, but after that we can put it in our pocket and forget about it. Rather, it is like a marriage, where we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ and become a part of His family, the church. The Christian life is a process of better understanding what Jesus taught, learning to apply that teaching in our everyday lives, and then teaching others—people directly around us and people on the other side of the globe—to do the same.

Q3 Why do you think Jesus would give us the strategy of disciple making as the means for accomplishing our mission on earth?

Q4 Take a minute to consider the significance of baptism. Write down some thoughts below. If you have been baptized, include some reflections on your own experience with baptism.

Q5 What role should teaching play in our Christian lives and in the life of the church?

The Continuing Presence of Jesus

If the Great Commission sounds impossible to you, that’s because it is. As daunting as the task to make disciples of all the nations on the face of the earth would be by itself, we also face serious opposition. Satan, the world, and our sinful desires fight against our growth in the Christian life and the advance of the gospel. Paul warned us that if we are going to live out this mission, we will experience persecution: “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). This very day, Christians around the world are being persecuted, beaten, and even put to death for identifying with Jesus Christ. We are mistaken if we think our message will always be received warmly. But while the opposition is real and intimidating, Jesus’s final words in the Great Commission should give us courage: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus’s very presence is promised to us so that we do not need to be afraid. Imagine how fearless you would be if you could physically see the Son of God by your side. He promises to be with us. Remember that God’s plan has never wavered, and our ultimate victory is assured.

Q6 Most likely, you already believe that God’s presence is with you as you seek to honor Him in this world. But take some time to meditate on that simple truth: “I am with you always.” How should this statement affect your daily life and the way you view your God-given mission?

The Power of the Holy Spirit

After telling His disciples that they would be His witnesses to the entire world, Jesus’s next instruction must have been surprising: “Wait.” For many of us, that doesn’t sound like great advice. After all, there’s a mass of humanity out there that needs the gospel. Don’t we need to hit

the ground running? The Great Commission will never be accomplished by human effort or wise planning, though both are crucial for the task. We need God's power in order to carry the gospel into every part of the globe. Only God's power can transform rebels into disciples. This is precisely why Jesus commanded His disciples to wait (Acts 1:4). Before moving out to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, the disciples had to be empowered by the Holy Spirit for this supernatural task.

Q7 Have you ever tried to follow Jesus apart from the power of the Holy Spirit? Why is this approach bound to end in frustration?

Q8 Given your specific setting, what would it look like to pursue the Great Commission through the power of the Spirit?

Finished and Unfinished

As we consider God's mission here on earth, it is important to recognize what has been finished and what is still unfinished. The New Testament is very clear that the work of salvation is complete. Hebrews says, "When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb. 10:12). In other words, Jesus did what needed to be done in order to reconcile humanity to God; then He sat down because everything was finished. This means that our message is simple and straightforward: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). But we still have a job to do. What remains unfinished is the task of bringing this message to the ends of the earth. God calls us to be His collaborators (1 Cor. 3:9) and ambassadors (2 Cor. 5). We are to carry the good news of what He has done in Jesus Christ to the very ends of the earth and work to see His rule fully established in every corner of the world. This means that we reach out to our next-door neighbors and the masses of East Asia. This is our calling in life. And ultimately, this is where God's plan of redemption has been moving from the very beginning. If the command to make disciples and minister sacrificially to God's people seems overwhelming, recall Jesus's reassuring words in the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ... and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church can fulfill its mission. Actually, Jesus promised that the church will fulfill its mission: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). God chose to fulfill His purposes on earth through His church, and He does not have a backup plan. God will use us as the church to reach the world with the hope and healing found in Jesus Christ.

Q9 Read Revelation 7:9–12. This passage gives us a vision of the end of the story. This life will conclude with an enormous community of redeemed people from every nation, tribe, people, and language praising God together for His salvation. How should this vision of the end of the story affect the way we think about our mission now?

Q10 Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to affect your heart with the urgency of the mission He has given you and the other Christians in your life. Ask Him for the strength, wisdom, and perseverance to pursue His mission in the strength of His Spirit.