

# Commission

---

Scripture Text: Matthew 28:16-20

**Lesson Synopsis:** Students will be invited to explore the Great Commission. Of special interest will be themes of doubt, going regardless of locality, the content of “making disciples,” and Jesus’ authority and continuing presence in his community. Students will be challenged to consider their own place in the carrying out of the Great Commission.

## Digging In

---

### Setting the Stage

In Matthew’s gospel, the passage found in 28:16-20 holds the second appearance of the risen Jesus. The first came in 28:9-10, where Jesus appeared to “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.” In that account, which spans from 28:1-10, these women were met by an angel on the first day of the week as they visited Jesus’ tomb. After telling them of Jesus’ resurrection, the angel instructed them to tell the disciples, “He is risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him” (28:7). As the women were on their way to fulfill the angel’s command, Jesus himself appeared to them. After offering greeting, Jesus too gave the two Marys a message for his disciples: “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (28:10). Twice, then, the Marys have been commissioned to tell the disciples that they will meet Jesus in Galilee. 28:16 opens with the disciples heeding their words. As that verse tells us, “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee...”

### Worship and Doubt

Even as 28:16-20 contains the second appearance of Jesus after his resurrection, it also contains the first gathering of the disciples since the same.<sup>1</sup> The last time we saw the disciples in Matthew’s gospel was in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:36-56), where they first fell asleep when Jesus asked them to keep watch and then deserted him when he was arrested. With this background in mind, we can imagine that the disciples were ashamed of their conduct in the wake of the arrest and crucifixion. This was certainly the case with Peter, who “wept bitterly” after disowning Jesus three times (26:69-75). Now they have received word of Jesus’ resurrection and his call to

Galilee. More than this, they have heard that he called them brothers despite their desertion. The good news for the disciples is two-fold. First, Jesus has risen. Second, in calling them brothers, Jesus has addressed them in the language of forgiveness rather than condemnation. This good news in mind, they have made their way to Galilee in obedience to Jesus' call. We can imagine here a mix of anticipation and trepidation as they await the appearance of their teacher.

When Jesus appears, the disciples worship him (28:17). This is no surprise to the readers of Matthew's gospel. After all, the disciples have worshiped Jesus once before after he walked on the water (14:33). Now, in light of the resurrection, we would expect nothing less! What is surprising, though, is the disciples' next reaction to Jesus: "but some doubted" (28:17). Even as all eleven disciples worship Jesus, some doubt. What are we to make of this seeming contradiction?

The Greek word translated as "doubted" in this passage is *distazo* and is the same word used in regard to Peter's doubt when he walked on the water in chapter 14. There, Peter's conviction wavered when he saw the wind, and Jesus chided him for having little faith. Importantly, Peter's doubt can be understood as a hesitation or wavering of conviction that comes even as he exercises faith in getting out of the boat in the first place. The same kind of doubt in the midst of faith is on display as the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples. They have already taken word of Jesus' resurrection by faith and journeyed to Galilee to meet him. Now they worship him at his appearance. Yet amidst these acts of faith, some have a feeling of wavering and hesitation. As Eugene Boring helpfully points out, "Thus, the same elements of worship, doubt, and little faith inhere in the church after Easter as before."<sup>ii</sup> The life of faith is not immune to doubt, and worship does not require unwavering conviction at every point in our faith journeys. Indeed the worship of the Church "does not exclude doubt, but takes doubt into itself."<sup>iii</sup> This was true even of the disciples as they worshiped in the presence of the risen Jesus, and it gives room for moments of doubt in the lives of disciples today. The community of faith is not made up of super heroes who never doubt, but instead of those who waver and whose faith needs to grow. And it is to this very community in which worship and doubt coexist that Jesus gives the commission that has become so dear to his followers.

## **The Great Commission**

Before examining the meat of the Great Commission, it is important to first note the authority with which it is given. In 28:18, Jesus begins the commission by saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This statement echoes the vision of Daniel in Daniel 7:13-14:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples 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.

The same Jesus who was mocked and crucified has now been resurrected and exalted. Indeed, the earth that rejected him has now been placed under his authority, and his reign will not pass away. It is from this authority that Jesus speaks his commission to his disciples. In this, he is not the leader of a small religious sect giving instructions to his followers. No, he is the Lord of heaven and earth, and he now calls his disciples to make his Lordship known and celebrated among the peoples of the earth. More than this, as one with authority, Jesus is not only able to give orders. Instead, “he also has the ability to help [his followers] carry out those orders.”<sup>v</sup> It is from a place of authority and power that Jesus speaks.

Having told his disciples of his exalted status, Jesus goes on to charge them with a task in what has become one of the more celebrated passages in the New Testament. He commands, “Therefore 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.” The primary command in this directive is that the disciples “make disciples of all nations.” To do this, they must “go,” a word that refers to the action of all disciples of Jesus, whether called to foreign lands or to stay at home. As Craig Blomberg states, “To ‘make disciples of *all nations*’ does require many people to leave their homelands, but Jesus’ main focus remains on the task of all believers to duplicate themselves wherever they may be.”<sup>vi</sup> Going, therefore, refers to moving with purpose in the place that God has placed us, whether at home or abroad. If we will accept it, each of us can play a role in the discipling of all nations, even if that nation happens to be our own.

Having told the disciples to “go and make disciples,” Jesus goes on to explain what making disciples entails. First, Jesus’ followers must baptize. As Craig Keener

### Who Are the Nations?

In using the phrase “all nations” in the Great Commission, Jesus widens the mission of the disciples from only Israel to the peoples of the entire earth. In identifying the nations, it is better to think in terms of people groups rather than nations like Germany or France. As John Piper says, “The aim of missions ... is that there be a church who worships God through Jesus Christ in all the peoples and tribes and languages and ethnic groups of the world.”<sup>iv</sup>

explains, “Baptism was an act of initiation and conversion ... and this text suggests that disciples initiate others into the faith.”<sup>vii</sup> Baptism, then, first requires an invitation to discipleship and then stands as a welcoming and initiation of those who accept the offer. Importantly, baptism requires that those wishing to follow Jesus make a public confession and also provides them with support from the baptized community.

Second, Jesus’ followers must teach. As Keener once again explains, “...mature disciples must also build the new disciples into stronger discipleship by teaching them Jesus’ message.”<sup>viii</sup> With this addition, making disciples becomes both a matter of invitation and exhortation. It is not enough to baptize new converts. No, these new converts need to be instructed and encouraged in the way of Jesus. Making disciples, then, is the activity of inviting people to follow Jesus and then helping them know how to follow Jesus. If either piece is missing, then Jesus’ command is left incomplete.

Having called his disciples to active disciple-making, Jesus now moves from their activity to his own. This is an important move, for Matthew’s gospel ends not with a command to activity but instead with a promise of presence. Jesus, who was called “God with us” at his birth (1:23), is and will continue to be with us. As Blomberg says, “In Jesus, God remains with us for now and eternity!”<sup>x</sup> Thus, he continues on as teacher and empowerer of his followers. Other books in the New Testament explain how Christ continues to be present with his people through the Holy Spirit, but Matthew does not get into the mechanics of the promise. He focuses on the content instead. While called to go, the redeemed community does not go alone. No, its Lord and Savior walks in its midst giving power and instruction even to the end of the age.

### What Is a Disciple?

“A disciple ... is basically the pupil of a teacher ... [Discipleship to Jesus] involve[s] personal allegiance to him, expressed in following him and giving him an exclusive loyalty...”<sup>ix</sup>

## Application

---

### A Note on Discipleship

In seeking application for this passage, it will be first helpful to observe how Jesus portrays the Christian life in the Great Commission. Note that he does not use the language of salvation, though that is found elsewhere in Matthew and also in many other places throughout the New Testament. Here, though, Jesus speaks of discipleship, which points to a lifelong process of learning and obedience. Of course, the ideas of salvation and discipleship are not mutually exclusive. After all, it is as we

follow Jesus' teachings that we are saved from the power of sin in our lives. At the same time, Jesus' use of the term discipleship points to an important aspect of the Christian life: it is a life of active obedience to Jesus. In hearing the language of discipleship, we become aware that Christians are not "saved to sit." Instead, we are saved to follow.

### **A Note on Doubt**

It is instructive in this passage to see some of the disciples doubting even as they worship in the presence of the living Jesus. If doubt was present even in this moment, then we can expect it to be present in the lives of later Christians who believe without seeing. Importantly, doubt does not disqualify a person from worship. Instead, we can worship even in the midst of our doubt. Moreover, doubt does not mean that we have left the faith. Instead, doubt can manifest itself as hesitation or wavering *even as we take steps of faith*. With this in mind, it is a tragedy that doubt in many Christian arenas is understood as a four-letter word. Rather than calling us to be super Christians who never waver in our faith, the story of the Great Commission makes room for our doubt even as it promises us that Jesus has been given authority and will never forsake us.

A further insight concerning doubt has to do with the fact that the Great Commission was given to a community in which doubt existed. Perfect faith is not a prerequisite to being used by God. Instead, as Paul helped us see (2 Cor 12:10), God works through our weaknesses.

### **A Note on Going**

For quite some time, the Great Commission has been used with a special focus on international missions. This is only natural in a world where everyone has not been given opportunity to hear the gospel. At the same time, it is dangerous to assign the Great Commission only to those who travel overseas. The task of the Great Commission is owned by all followers of Jesus, and it can be lived out wherever God plants them. In Acts 1:8, the apostles are told that they will be Christ's witnesses in "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth." While some Christians were indeed called to faraway lands (the ends of the earth), many were called to stay at home in Jerusalem. Regardless of their location, though, all were able to purposefully witness to Jesus. The same is true today.

### **A Note on Mission**

Matthew 28:18-20 contains what is truly a “great commission” for the church. It lets us know that that we are to be an evangelizing community that calls people to follow Jesus. Importantly, our task of making disciples is in two parts. First, we are to baptize. Second, we are to teach. If either of these is lacking, then Jesus’ command stands incomplete. In this we see two aspects of church growth playing out. First, in baptism, the church grows through numerical addition. Second, through teaching, the church grows as individual believers grow in their personal walks of faith. In the Great Commission, both of these aspects of church growth are present. We might ask, then, about the quality of our evangelism and our teaching. Are we living lives that invite people into the Christian community? Once they take part, are we bringing them up in the faith?

### **A Note on Authority and Continued Presence**

To hear that we should make disciples of all peoples can be daunting. After all, it is can be unnerving to feel prompted by God to leave your homeland in order to take the gospel to a people whom you do not know. Along the same lines, it can be unnerving to hear the call to take the gospel to your own people when the culture is becoming less and less friendly to a Christian worldview. The call to make disciples is a challenging call that takes us out of our comfort zones.

All this in mind, it is important to remember that Jesus does not simply tells us to do a hard job and then leave us to our own strength. Instead, Jesus speaks as the ruler of heaven and earth who is able to empower us to the task. More than this, he promises never to leave us alone. Yes, the Commission can be difficult and even costly. But we serve a Lord who walks with us and empowers us to the task he has given.

## **Teaching Helps**

---

**Icebreaker:** To get people talking, begin with the following question, “How did you become a Christian?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

**Time for Sharing:** Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the gospel of Matthew that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

**Lesson Introduction:** Let the class know that today's lesson will come from Thursday's reading and will focus on Matthew 28:16-20, where Jesus gives the Great Commission.

### Personal Experience

- **Question:** Ask participants what they know about the Great Commission. How has it been used in their experience?

### Worship and Doubt

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read Matt 28:16-17.
  - **Question:** What is the context of this passage? Why are the disciples in Galilee? When was the last time that we saw the disciples? What do you think they were thinking?
  - **Question:** What is the disciples' response to seeing Jesus in this passage?
  - **Question:** Why do you think that "some doubted"?
    - Be ready to lead a discussion on doubt and faith, drawing on the "Worship and Doubt" section above.
  - **Question:** What is the place of doubt in our lives today?

### Authority

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read Matt 28:18.
  - **Question:** Why does it matter that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to Jesus? (See "The Great Commission" section above for more on this.)

### The Great Commission

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read Matt 28:19-20
- **Going**
  - **Question:** What is the scope of Jesus' commission?
    - **Question:** How should we understand "the nations"?
  - **Question:** What does it mean to go? Does anyone have any stories of someone who "went" in response to this command?
  - **Question:** To whom is the command to go given? (For more on this, see "A Note on Going" section above.)
- **Making Disciples**
  - **Question:** What does Jesus tell his disciples to do as they go?
  - **Question:** What does it mean to make disciples? What two activities does Jesus place under this category?
  - **Question:** Why is baptizing a part of making disciples?
  - **Question:** Why is teaching a part of making disciples?
  - **Question:** How can we know if we are fulfilling the Great Commission?

## The Promise of Presence

- **Question:** What promise does Jesus make after commissioning his disciples?
- **Question:** How is Jesus still present with his people?
- **Question:** Why does this promise matter to Jesus' followers?

---

<sup>i</sup> This insight from: Eugene M. Boring and Leander E. Keck, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," vol. 8, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1995), 502.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>iv</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Baker Academic, 2010), 232.

<sup>v</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *The New American Commentary* v. 22 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1992), 431.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 720.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> I. Howard Marshall et al., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (InterVarsity Press, 1996), 277. See article on "Discipleship." <sup>x</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 434.