

Moments *for* You

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The Great Commission



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.

Matthew 28:19-20



WHAT IS THE GREAT COMMISSION?

Matthew 28:19–20 contains what has come to be called the Great Commission. Jesus gave this command to the apostles shortly before He ascended into Heaven, and it essentially outlines what Jesus expected the apostles and those who followed them to do in His absence.

It is interesting that, in the original Greek, the only direct command in Matthew 28:19–20 is “make disciples.” The Great Commission instructs us to make disciples while we are going throughout the world. The instructions to “go,” “baptize,” and “teach” are indirect commands—participles in the original text. How are we to make disciples? By baptizing them and teaching them all that Jesus commanded. “Make disciples” is the primary command of the Great Commission. “Going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching” are the means by which we fulfill the command to “make disciples.”

A disciple is someone who receives instruction from another person; a Christian disciple is a baptized follower of Christ, one who believes the

teaching of Christ. A disciple of Christ imitates Jesus’ example, clings to His sacrifice, believes in His resurrection, possesses the Holy Spirit, and lives to do His work. The command in the Great Commission to “make disciples” means to teach or train people to follow and obey Christ.

Many understand Acts 1:8 as part of the Great Commission as well: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The Great Commission is enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are to be Christ’s witnesses, fulfilling the Great Commission in our cities (Jerusalem), in our states and countries (Judea and Samaria), and anywhere else God sends us (to the ends of the earth).

Throughout the book of Acts, we see how the apostles began to fulfill the Great Commission, as outlined in Acts 1:8. First, Jerusalem is evangelized (Acts 1–7); then the Spirit expands the church through Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12); finally, the gospel reaches into “the ends of the earth” (Acts 13–28). Today, we

continue to act as ambassadors for Christ, and “we plead on Christ’s behalf: ‘Be reconciled to God’” (2 Corinthians 5:20, CSB).

We have received a precious gift: “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Jesus’ words in the Great Commission reveal the heart of God, “who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The Great Commission compels us to share the good news until everyone has heard. —GotQuestions.org

WHY THE GREAT COMMISSION?

Throughout the last 2000 years Christians have gone to extreme lengths in order to carry out the Great Commission. There are countless examples of Christians who have given up high-paying jobs, sacrificed comfortable lifestyles, and even risked their lives. What could possibly be the motivation behind making such extreme life choices?

ISAIAH’S COMMISSION

In Isaiah 6, the prophet Isaiah is confronted with the holiness of God. When he witnesses God’s perfect holiness he is immediately convicted of his sin and recognizes that he deserves punishment. He says: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips” (6:5). However, God shows mercy to Isaiah. God demonstrates Isaiah’s salvation when an angel takes a piece of coal and touches Isaiah’s lips with it (6:6-7). Instead of giving Isaiah the punishment that he deserved, God provided grace for him.

After this interaction, God asks Isaiah: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” (6:8). God was looking for a servant to represent Him in the world. Isaiah’s response to this

question is revealing: “Here I am! Send me” (6:8).

Why is it that Isaiah responds with such excitement? I believe there are at least two reasons. First, God had just shown Isaiah more mercy than he could have possibly imagined. He deserved God’s holy punishment but instead received God’s grace. When this gracious God asked for a servant, the only natural response for Isaiah was to enthusiastically volunteer himself. The second reason Isaiah responded with such intensity was because he couldn’t wait to tell the world about the God who saves. After both understanding the punishment he deserved and experiencing God’s grace, Isaiah desired for many more people to come to know God in this same way. His life had been changed—he wanted others to have their lives changed as well.

THE CHRISTIAN’S COMMISSION

Isaiah’s call to ministry exemplifies the Christian’s relationship to the Great Commission quite well. Whether you were a prophet living in Old Testament times or are a person living today, salvation is found through the grace of God alone. God’s holiness requires a punishment for sin. When Isaiah realized this, he cried out, “Woe is me!” He understood what is true for all mankind, that sin results in God’s wrath. However, just as God demonstrated His grace to Isaiah, He has done the same for us. In God’s grace He sent Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless life as a man on the Earth. Jesus then went to the cross and took God’s punishment for sin. All who place their faith in Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection will find true salvation. Just as Isaiah responded with excitement, those who realize their sin and come to know God’s great salvation

will naturally have an overwhelming desire to serve Him by telling others about Him. Christians who seek to fulfill the Great Commission do so both because their redeeming God has asked them to and because it is the obvious response to such a great salvation!

When we hear of those who have given up everything, even risking their lives, to proclaim the gospel we should not think of them as foolish. While their decisions may not appear logical, they risk it all because they have been given all they need. They give up their lives so that others may find salvation, just as their Savior did for them.

—Erik Rasmussen

TO TELL THE TRUTH

When you think of the term evangelism, what picture flashes into your mind? A large stadium filled with people? A small booklet with a set of diagrams? A Christian wearing a pin with the symbol of a fish? A zealous believer playing intellectual chess with an atheistic opponent? A salesman convincing a reluctant person to “try Jesus”?

Evangelism is a 10-letter dirty word to some of us. While we think it’s a good idea for others, we’re sure it isn’t for us. We’re not cut out to sell, nor shrewd enough to play intellectual games with non-Christians. Evangelism, though, isn’t about being a salesman who cons people into buying what they don’t need. It has nothing to do with simply grabbing people’s attention and forcing on them a faith that goes no deeper than a scripted prayer.

Evangelism is simply sharing with others what we know about Jesus. “What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:5). No tricks. No deception.

Speak the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth—in love. Then leave the results with God.

—Haddon W. Robinson, adapted

WHO’S YOUR ONE?

One day, a man walked the beach after a storm. Strong tides came in and out. As he strolled the shore, he noticed a little boy grabbing starfish from the sand and feverishly throwing them into the water. The man was intrigued. The beach was littered with starfish. What did the boy hope to accomplish? He had to ask what the boy was doing.

“I’m saving starfish,” the boy answered, breathlessly, as he continued working.

“But, son,” the man replied, “There are starfish everywhere. Do you think what you are doing will really make a difference?”

Unfazed, the boy selected another starfish and threw it into the sea. As he tossed the starfish into the water, he said, “It will matter to this one!”

CAN WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The many diverse and pressing needs of the world around us leave some to wonder if it is possible to truly make a difference. But we are not responsible for the multitudes that we have no control over. We are, however, responsible for the ones we can help. We must learn to do for the one what we wish we could do for the many.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is the mission of the church. We are to make more and better disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in our community and throughout the nations. This is a mission that is as small as your next-door neighbors and as large as the more than seven and half billion people on planet earth.

The thought of reaching the world for Christ can be overwhelming. But the truth is the Lord has not called you to reach the world. For that matter, Billy Graham, one of the greatest Christian evangelists in the history of the church, did not reach the world. You may not reach as many people as Billy Graham did. But you can reach as many people as Graham's parents did. They reached at least one—Billy! And the Lord used that one to reach many others.

JUST PICK ONE

I want to issue you a spiritual challenge. Will you commit to praying for the salvation of one lost person and seek opportunities to share the gospel with him or her? It can be a friend, relative, coworker, classmate, or acquaintance. It can even be an enemy. After all, Jesus did tell us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

Ask God to help you identify one unsaved or unchurched person. You may already have identified your one as you read this article. Make a commitment to pray that your one will trust the finished work of Christ for salvation. For how long? Don't stop praying until your one comes to Christ.

What should you do when your one gets saved? First, celebrate! Jesus said, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). Then, begin to build a discipling relationship with them. In this process, help them start to read the Bible and find a church. Finally, identify a new "one" and begin praying, investing, and witnessing until he or she believes in Jesus.

Evangelism is a biblical mandate for every Christian. Yet you find it dif-

ficult, don't you? So do it. The thought of standing on some street corner with a megaphone or knocking on some random person's door frightens the daylights out of me! But I refuse to use my weakness as an excuse to do nothing.

I may not be able to rush into a crowd of strangers and start talking about Jesus. But I can pray for and invest in one person the Lord places on my heart that needs Christ. You can too! Start today by identifying your one. Make a commitment to pray daily for the salvation of that person. Seek opportunities to have conversations with your one about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who's your one? —H.B. Charles Jr.

THE APOSTLE'S GREAT COMMISSION

Try to put yourself in the mind of one of the eleven apostles on that hill in the first century. Standing on the Mount of Olives they heard the now familiar command, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). Then they watched as their Master was taken up and disappeared into a cloud. As they stood there looking for their Lord, their heavenly gaze was broken by two men in white reminding them of the words Jesus had spoken to them, "I will come again" (John 14:3). The eleven men returned to Jerusalem and waited for ten days. But they were not idle. They appointed a new apostle and "continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14 NKJV). Then came the Day of Pentecost. The apostles were afforded their first opportunity to put this commission into action. Through their obedience to their Lord's final words, three thousand souls were saved that day alone.

We do not read the apostles' thoughts on the matter. We only have the words of Simon Peter's passionate argument on the power of Christ's work on the cross and his plea for the listeners' repentance. When I speculate on the mental state of the apostles I am awed by their subsequent actions. These are men who had just witnessed their Master and Rabbi murdered, seen Him risen from the dead, and then watched Him leave them again for an unspecified amount of time. Imagine the emotional rollercoaster! However, instead of being disheartened by this new reality without the physical presence of their Master, the apostles were filled with an unmatched boldness and zeal. This speaks to the proof of the Lord's resurrection. These men did not act as a defeated group whose leader was dead. This could have been the time to run, hide, and disappear back into society, but not for these men. Instead, they lived with the assurance that their Lord was alive, and His message was true. These men had seen the risen Lord and they would not stop proclaiming the message.

In Acts 4, Peter and John were threatened with punishment by the rulers, elders, and scribes. But they continued to preach the gospel, proclaiming what they had seen and heard. Observing their actions, I am humbled by their immediate zeal to preach the word, and by their joy in suffering both persecution and death for the sake of their Lord (Acts 5:41). What a rebuke for many of us. Most of us in the West have not yet faced the threat of persecution. We do not fear beatings, imprisonment, or death as many Christians throughout history and around the world have. Yet, despite our safety, we struggle to participate in the Great Commis-

sion as the disciples did. There is no valid excuse for any of us not to share the gospel.

Our inward focus is often the main reason that we do not proclaim the gospel as often as we should. When we focus on ourselves, our reputation, or our pride it is a sure way to lose sight of the Savior and His commands. The apostles faithfully held to the Great Commission because their eyes were fixed solely on Christ. At the end of Acts 2, we read that they were steadfast in teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. This daily devotion to the Lord kept them close. In order for any of us to have a deep communion with our Savior and have a hope of following His commission, we have to daily deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him (Luke 9:23).

This commission is to *all* who call on the name of the Lord. It is not only for some of us, or just for those with certain abilities. It is an appeal to all to lay aside the sin and the distractions that hinder us. It is a plea to run the race with our gaze on Jesus, the founder and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2). Following the example of those who have come before us, let us be occupied with Him, having His word flow out of our hearts and upon the ears of the world around us. Let us proclaim. Let us endure. Let us run the race. —Benjamin Higgs

A GREAT ORDINARY COMMISSION

When I teach on the Great Commission, I often begin by asking my students, "What is Jesus' primary emphasis in the Great Commission?" Typically, most students reply, "evangelism." I then ask them to read the Great Commission from Matthew 28:18–20, after which I ask my ques-

tion a second time. The students quickly see that although the Great Commission includes a call to evangelism, it doesn't actually contain the word evangelism. What the students observe through more careful study of the Great Commission is that Jesus' primary emphasis is on making disciples.

Making disciples certainly includes evangelism but is by no means limited to evangelism. The sort of disciple-making to which Jesus commissions the church involves much more, including baptizing and teaching. Simply put, if we have only evangelized a people or a nation, we have not been obedient to the fullness of the Great Commission. In addition to evangelism, Jesus provided us with specific instructions that we are to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and that we are to teach people "to observe all that I have commanded you."

Moreover, if we have only evangelized, baptized, and received a person into church membership, we have not been obedient to the fullness of the Great Commission. Both baptizing and teaching are the ministry of the local church around the world, and this is why the local church sends us forth to make disciples. As missionaries, preachers, and teachers, we go to all nations to plant, equip, and disciple the church of Jesus Christ. We are called not simply to evangelize and baptize and move on, but we are called to stay the course to do the hard work of teaching Jesus' disciples to observe all that He commanded, including the command to "go and make disciples of all nations."

— Burk Parsons

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37).

PICTURE OF A DISCIPLE

On my first day of high school I was six feet tall. When I went to my physical education class the teacher, Mr. Koeppe, approached me and introduced himself as the freshman basketball coach. He asked if I had ever played basketball and told me to try out for the team.

Mr. Koeppe took attendance, explained the course expectations, then let us play basketball until the class was over. I grabbed a basketball and played with the other kids, but I was absolutely terrible. While I was taller than everyone else, I lacked many basic skills required for the game.

Mr. Koeppe never asked me about playing basketball again. He had a picture of what he wanted in a basketball player. A boy that was tall was only one piece of the picture. He also wanted someone who could dribble, shoot, and play defense.

In the Great Commission, Jesus commands us to make disciples. The New Testament then paints a picture of what a disciple of Jesus Christ looks like. Jesus and His apostles describe four qualities of a true disciple.

THEY EMBRACE GOD'S WORD

The book of Acts reveals the earliest events of the church. The first Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Several years later, while the church in Corinth had many problems, Paul praised them for studying what he gave them. "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2).

Embracing God's word means applying what a disciple learns to his or her life. Peter gave us an example of applying what he learned. In 2 Peter he acknowledges Paul's letters

(2 Peter 3:15–17) and how we are supposed to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Peter and others had been reading Paul’s letters, interpreting their meanings, and applying them to their lives.

THEY EMBODY GOD’S KINGDOM

In addition to embracing God’s word, disciples embody God’s kingdom on earth. The dictionary defines embody as “to make concrete and perceptible” or to “give a tangible or visible form to an idea or quality.” Christ’s disciples are tangible expressions of Christ on earth.

Paul tells us that “we are citizens of Heaven” (Philippians 3:20, NLT) and we “must live as citizens of Heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ” (Philippians 1:27, NLT). We are supposed to look different than the rest of the world.

There are many ways we should look different. We don’t participate in the evil things that unbelievers do (1 Thessalonians 4:3–7). We should be attractive based on our deeds, not our looks (1 Timothy 2:9–15). We don’t allow our bodies to be used for lustful sin (Romans 6:13).

THEY ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

A best-selling self-help book of the 1980s started with three words: “Life is difficult.” But the Christian life is even more difficult, so it requires us to encourage one another.

You can’t encourage fellow believers if you are absent from them. We are told to participate in community together in Hebrews 10:24–25, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” By meeting together we are able to “encourage one another and build

one another up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). And that only happens when we see one another in fellowship.

We also need to be there for people who need someone. Widows (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Timothy 5:3), orphans (James 1:27), and the poor (Galatians 2:10; Romans 12:13) all need us. Christians sometimes resist the fact that we need other people involved in our lives. We want to be independent. But in the life of a disciple, dependence on others is essential.

THEY EVANGELIZE OTHERS

The New Testament says some people have the “gift” of evangelism and this tempts us to leave it for others gifted in that area. But every disciple is called to evangelize others.

A disciple of Jesus Christ shares the gospel regularly. Peter tells us to always be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

While we might not travel thousands of miles to preach the gospel like Paul or write a letter to many people while exiled on an island like John, we must be ready to share the gospel in every situation.

I have not always been a good disciple. For a period of my life I engaged in deep study of Scripture while not encouraging others who needed it. At another time I was so focused on being a good Christian that I neglected to tell others about Jesus. But the New Testament paints a complete picture of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Like Mr. Koepp, my PE teacher, our Lord wants people playing for His team who are well-rounded. Disciples should pursue all of these qualities: embracing His word, embodying His kingdom, encouraging one another, and evangelizing others.

—Christopher L. Scott