

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18 - The Great Commission

Matthew 28: 18-20

Jesus said: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

In today's passage we are given three Commands: **GO.....BAPTIZE.....TEACH** and One Promise: **I am with you always**

The command to **GO** should first be to the people in our closest proximity:

- Family members
- Neighbors
- Work associates

Which of these is the most difficult for you?

then to people in our Nation:

- Domestic Mission Trips, bringing aid to victims of tragedies State-side (hurricanes, floods, etc.). Have you ever participated in a Domestic Mission Trip?

then to the World:

- Foreign Mission Trips – Over the years, our church has sent Mission Teams to Honduras, Tanzania, Belize, and Dominican Republic

What about His command to **BAPTIZE**? Do we as Christians have the “authority” to baptize someone? Have you ever been in a situation where someone asked you to baptize them? If you found yourself in that situation, would you know what to do? Would you feel “equipped” to baptize them?

Finally, His command to **TEACH**. What are we to teach? Jesus said: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” How can we know what He has commanded if we're not reading his Word daily? If we make it a practice to be in God's Word daily, we will know His commands, and we will feel confident and equipped to share them with others.

These were the last recorded words that Jesus spoke, so He must have felt they were important words for his disciples (and us!) to hear and to heed.

In Exodus 4:10 – Moses said to the Lord: “O my Lord, I am not eloquent. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord said to Moses: “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now GO. I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”

Just as He promised to be with Moses then, He promises to be with us now!

Some things to ponder:

- Are the last words of Jesus some of my first thoughts each day? Do I begin my day by asking Jesus to show me who He wants me to share His message with? Do I sometimes see people who “stumble across my path” as “interruptions?” Especially if they happen to “stumble” at an inconvenient time for me? How can I begin to see these “interruptions” as an assignment from God to make a disciple?
- Am I (like Moses) fearful to share the Good News because I don’t feel like I would know what to say? Don’t forget Jesus’ promise: “I am with you always.”

Prayer: Lord, as we go about your work today, help us to be mindful of anyone who you might put in our path who needs to hear the Good News! And, when given the opportunity, give us the boldness to speak and the confidence that You will speak through us. Amen.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19 – God’s Protection

Exodus 14:19-20

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

When the Israelites heard Pharaoh’s chariots pursuing them, the angel of God and the pillar of cloud, who had both been going before them, leading them, moved and went behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. In this way the Lord protected His people. He “had their back.” He moved His position so that He could protect them from behind. He was their Rear Guard.

God provides protection for us today as well. It may not come in the form of a traveling cloud or via an angel, but He still provides. Today, God equips us with weapons to fight our battles. We find these weapons in Ephesians 6:10-17:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 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. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

By “praying on” this armor, suiting up in it every day, we are protected. We can stand firm against our enemies.

A list of each piece of armor:

- the **belt** of Truth buckled around your waist
- the **breastplate** of Righteousness in place
- your **feet** fitted with the Readiness that comes from the gospel of peace
- the **shield** of Faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the Evil One
- the **helmet** of Salvation
- the **sword** of the Spirit, which is the Word of God

Some questions to ponder:

- Which piece of armor are you most grateful for today?
- Which piece do you most need to rely on today?

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your protection today and every day. Help us to remember to put on the Full Armor of God each day as we prepare to serve you and others. Amen.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20 – The Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

We all need an occasional visit to the doctor for a checkup to make sure everything is working properly and that we don't have an unknown serious internal condition. The same is true with our spiritual lives. In the same way that the doctor puts us through a battery of tests to diagnose potential physical problems, God has given us a process of evaluating spiritual problems in our lives:

1. Love. This word for love doesn't refer to warm feelings but to a deliberate attitude of good will and devotion to others. Love gives freely without looking at whether the other person deserves it, and it gives without expecting anything back.

Question: *Am I motivated to do for others as Christ has done for me, or am I giving in order to receive something in return?*

2. Joy. Unlike happiness, joy is gladness that is completely independent of the good or bad things that happen in the course of the day. In fact, joy denotes a supernatural gladness given by God's Spirit that actually seems to show up best during hard times. This is a product of fixing our focus on God's purposes for the events in our life rather than on the circumstances.

Question: *Am I experiencing a joy of life on a regular basis, or is my happiness dependent on things going smoothly in my day?*

3. Peace. It's not the absence of turmoil, but the presence of tranquility even while in a place of chaos. It is a sense of wholeness and completeness that is content knowing that God controls the events of the day.

Question: *Do I find myself frazzled by the crashing waves of turmoil in my life, or am I experiencing "the peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:6-7)?*

4. Patience. Other words that describe this fruit are long-suffering, forbearance, perseverance, and steadfastness. It is the ability to endure ill treatment from life or at the hands of others without lashing out or paying back.

Question: *Am I easily set off when things go wrong or people irritate me, or am I able to keep a godly perspective in the face of life's irritations?*

5. Kindness. When kindness is at work in a person's life, he or she looks for ways to adapt to meet the needs of others. It is moral goodness that overflows. It's also the absence of malice.

Question: *Is it my goal to serve others with kindness, or am I too focused on my own needs, desires or problems to let the goodness of God overflow to others?*

6. Goodness. Goodness reflects the character of God. Goodness in you desires to see goodness in others, and is not beyond confronting or even rebuking (as Jesus did with the money changers in the temple).

Question: *Does my life reflect the holiness of God, and do I desire to see others experience God at a deep level in their own lives?*

7. Faithfulness. A faithful person is one with real integrity. He or she is someone others can look to as an example, and someone who is truly devoted to others and to Christ. Our natural self always wants to be in charge, but Spirit-controlled faithfulness is evident in the life of a person who seeks good for others and glory for God.

Question: Are there areas of hypocrisy and indifference toward others in my life, or is my life characterized by faith in Christ and faithfulness to those around me?

8. Gentleness. Meekness is not weakness. Gentleness is not without power, it just chooses to defer to others. It forgives others, corrects with kindness, and lives in tranquility.

Question: Do I come across to others as brash and headstrong, or am I allowing the grace of God to flow through me to others?

9. Self-control. Our fleshly desires are continually at odds with God's Spirit and always want to be in charge. Self-control is literally releasing our grip on the fleshly desires, choosing instead to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. It is power focused in the right place.

Question: Are my fleshly desires controlling my life, or am I allowing the Spirit to direct me to the things that please God and serve others?

Prayer: Lord, help us to follow the Spirit's leading today instead of being led by our self-focused desires. Empower us, through your Spirit to live above ourselves and live the abundant life for which you have created us.

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MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22 – Facing our Fears

2 Timothy 1:7

God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

The reality TV show *Fear Factor* features people who are willing to face their worst fears for notoriety and financial gain. It's not easy to watch people eat cockroaches, immerse themselves in a tank full of creepy worms, and stay under water with slimy eels crowding around their heads. But the program is a reminder that fear is an emotion that we are all very familiar with.

Thinking of this program makes me wonder: Would I be willing to conquer my fears to do what Jesus asks me to do, just as these contestants overcome their fears for a moment in the spotlight of National Television?

Fear has a way of interfering with our effectiveness for Christ. We are often fearful about witnessing, giving our money away, saying no to our friends, saying yes to a short-term mission trip, or risking being misunderstood if we speak up for Biblical values at work. If Satan can get us sidetracked with fear, he doesn't have to do much else to shut down our spiritual progress and usefulness.

Fear primarily focuses on protecting and preserving "me." Overcoming fear begins with deciding that some things in life are more important than ourselves. Things like:

- the eternal destinies of others
- the prosperity of the work of Christ in our world
- the reputation of Jesus is more important than my fleeting popularity
- His integrity and righteousness showing up in my life is more important than cheating for some personal gain

Once we realize that a self-surpassing passion for others and Jesus trumps fear, we can understand why the apostle John wrote that *"perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18)*.

We need to trust that God will protect us when we are fearful, that God will give us guidance and courage when we feel lost and intimidated. That He will help us defeat the fear that holds us back. We must trust God to watch over us, to meet our needs, and give us His best, and those fears will become increasingly nonexistent. When our lives are characterized by trust-filled love, fear will disappear.

Some things to Ponder:

- What does God want you to do but you are afraid of doing?
- List the advances you could make spiritually if fear were not a factor in your life.
- What would it take for you to be more passionate about others and Jesus than you are about yourself?
- In Psalm 56:3, what did David say he would do in the face of fear? Are you ready to do the same?

Prayer: Lord, help us to rely on You when we are fearful. Help us to overcome our fears by trusting in your grace and strength. Amen.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23 – Persecution for the Gospel’s Sake

Matthew 5:11-12

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In today’s passage Jesus gives a “Good News/Bad News” announcement to His disciples.

The Bad News (vs. 11): They could expect to be insulted, persecuted and falsely accused for their identity with Him. As Christians growing up in the West, we have not experienced the level of persecution faced by those living for Christ in places like China, the Sudan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other hot spots of blatant opposition to the Gospel. On a much smaller scale, we all face the distinct possibility of being misunderstood and ostracized for standing up for Jesus in a day when He and His claims are becoming increasingly unpopular. Most of us have experienced the raised eyebrow of a friend when we have mentioned that Jesus is the only way to God. Bishop Kwashi of Nigeria said: “We in my country share the Gospel in the face of a raised gun, and you American’s hesitate sharing the Gospel in the face of a raised eyebrow.” Wow, what a sobering thought!

The Good News (vs. 12): Jesus promises that we are “blessed” when we are persecuted for His sake. As He said, “Great is your reward in heaven.” Blessed? Rewarded? No one feels blessed or rewarded when they are being insulted or persecuted. We must remember that the temporary troubles that we experience here on this earth put into perspective the eternal rewards in the world to come.

2 Corinthians 4:17 - *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

Next time you feel the press of the warfare, remember: Great is your reward in heaven.

Some things to Ponder:

- In what specific ways does the promise of Jesus in the *Matthew* passage change your attitude toward suffering for Jesus if that becomes necessary?
- What challenges have you faced for sticking up for Jesus in your world? What challenges have you faced for obeying Him? As we leave this place tomorrow to travel home, what can we do to keep in mind that this world is not only temporary but also hostile toward Jesus and that we need to live here in the light of the world to come?

Prayer: Lord, give us the courage to represent you wherever we go without the fear of persecution. And, if we ever do face persecution for the Gospel’s sake, help us to keep our eyes on You, our Great Reward!