



SERIES: "THIS IS THE WAY"

HOW DISCIPLES ARE MADE • MATTHEW 28:18-20 • 2.6.22

MAIN POINT

The Great Commission is fulfilled as every believer takes seriously the imperative of Jesus to “make disciples of all nations” and is rooted in the promise that Jesus will be with us as we fulfill His mission.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

If someone were to ask you what it means to disciple someone, what ideas or actions would you include in your response? Why did you pick those?

What examples of disciple making do you recall in the Bible (other than Jesus and His disciples)? What similar characteristics or elements do those examples share?

Who have been the most influential people in your life as it pertains to your growth in Christ?

In this week's session, Matthew recorded Jesus' giving of the Great Commission to the eleven disciples following His resurrection. His instructions were pointed and clear. Jesus reminded them that all authority over everything was His, then gave them their marching orders. The disciples were to make other disciples, understanding that in the face of this monumental task, Jesus was with them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

READ MATTHEW 28:18.

What does it mean to have authority? Who currently has the ability to exercise authority over you in your various circles of life? How does that change how you relate to them?

Where do you personally exercise authority—home, work, school, civic functions, etc.? What responsibilities come with your ability to do so? What boundaries does your personal authority have?

Immediately, Jesus began His preparatory instruction to His disciples in light of their new role in the redemptive work of God in the world. For the past three years, the disciples had journeyed with Him, observed Him, questioned Him, and even fulfilled divine tasks of being sent out in pairs to mimic the ministry of Jesus. Now, however, they would move into a much more significant role than they had ever experienced. Anticipating their response in the coming days, Jesus reminded them that all authority had been given to Him in heaven and on earth. Nothing was beyond His limitless jurisdiction. In language that recalled Daniel 7:13-14, which would not have

been lost on His Jewish disciples, Jesus affirmed that He was not only the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy, but also that He was, without doubt, God.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 28:19-20A.

When you read “Go” as, “As you are going,” what places that you normally visit come to mind? Which of the people in those familiar locales strikes you as needing the investment of being made a disciple? How does that involve you?

With which of those you come into contact regularly have you initiated gospel conversations? How would you start one of those conversations with someone?

Referring to all nations made the commission that Jesus gave immediately larger than the disciples could have ever accomplished alone. This is particularly true given the complementary nature of the baptizing and teaching.

There was nothing of an instant nature in the making of a disciple in Jesus’ directive. The heart of disciple making, then, was the teaching of Jesus’ commands to the point at which the new believer began to follow those commands faithfully. Only when such was the case could evangelism be considered holistic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 28:20B.

How does recognizing that Jesus has authority over everyone you engage in gospel conversations with inform your confidence to be faithful?

How does knowing that Jesus will never leave you or forsake you frame the way you view challenges and rejections that come along with sharing your faith?

These three verses at the close of Matthew's Gospel actually tied all the way back to Matthew 1:23, in which Matthew explained the words of the angel to Joseph regarding Jesus' coming birth. In fulfillment of prophecy, Matthew reminded his readers that Jesus' name would be called Immanuel—“God with us.” Now at the conclusion of his Gospel, Matthew underscored the fulfillment of that promise in the giving of the Holy Spirit to believers. God with us is an eternal reality for those who are in Christ.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

If Jesus has authority over all things (and He does), what does that mean for His commission to make disciples? Why do you think believers frequently treat something as optional that Jesus never intended to be optional?

How confident do you feel initiating gospel conversations with people you come into contact with? Who do you know that would be a great person to learn from in that regard? How can you take a step in that direction this week?

How are you personally growing in Christ right now? How can your own discipleship fuel your obedience to be a disciple maker for others?

PRAYER

Ask the Father to give you a renewed sense of urgency to share the gospel with those around you. Pray that our church would seek to make disciples of all people. Pray that

you would grow as a disciple as you disciple others.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 28:18-20

28:18 Verses 18–20 bring us to the climax and conclusion of Matthew. Jesus is passing the torch to his disciples, even as he promises to be with them forever—spiritually, not physically—to empower them for future mission. Jesus can make the claim of v. 18 only if he is fully God, inasmuch as the whole universe is embraced in the authority delegated to him. And yet he is still in some sense distinct from his Heavenly Father, so that Matthew can use the divine passive in speaking of his having “been given” this authority. Clear allusions to the heavenly Son of Man figure of Dan 7:13–14 appear here. Christ’s exaltation, as the result of his resurrection, means that one day “every knee” will bow and “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:9–11), whether or not they do so voluntarily as part of his redeemed people. Because of this authority, Jesus has the right to issue his followers their “marching orders,” but he also has the ability to help them carry out those orders.

28:19a The main command of Christ’s commission is “make disciples” (mathēteusate). Too much and too little have often been made of this observation. Too much is made of it when the disciples’ “going” is overly subordinated, so that Jesus’ charge is to proselytize merely where one is. Matthew frequently uses “go” as an introductory circumstantial participle that is rightly translated as coordinate to the main verb—here “Go and make” (cf. 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7). Too little is made of it when all attention is centered on the command to “go,” as in countless appeals for missionary candidates, so that foreign missions are elevated to a higher status of Christian service than other forms of spiritual activity. 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. The verb “make disciples” also commands a kind of evangelism that does not

stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: “baptizing” them and “teaching” them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.

“All nations” translates *panta ta ethnē*. The two main options for interpreting *ethnē* are Gentiles (non-Jews) and peoples (somewhat equivalent to ethnic groups). The former translation is popular among those who see either Jesus or Matthew as believing that God once-for-all rejected the Jews. Matthew’s most recent uses of *ethnē* (24:9, 14; 25:32) seem to include Jews and Gentiles alike as the recipients of evangelism and judgment. God is not turning his back on Jewish people here. What has changed is that they can no longer be saved simply by trusting in God under the Mosaic covenant. All who wish to be in fellowship with God must now come to him through Jesus.

28:19b Without further qualification, baptism will most naturally refer to that which John and Jesus have already practiced (see under 3:1–17; cf. John 3:26; 4:1–3). “Them” (*autous*) shifts to the masculine pronoun from the neuter *peoples* (*ethnē*) and therefore implies a shift from groups to individuals (as in 25:32). Hence, the missiological debate about the validity of group conversions cannot be settled by any appeal to this text. “In [or into] the name” means declaring allegiance to or becoming associated with the power and authority of Jesus. The singular “name” followed by the threefold reference to “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” suggests both unity and plurality in the Godhead. Here is the clearest Trinitarian “formula” anywhere in the Gospels, and it is therefore often accused of being a very late development and not at all something Jesus himself could have imagined. But this view misjudges both the speed of the development of New Testament theology (cf. Jesus as God already in Acts 3:14–15 — unless by circular reasoning this passage is also dismissed as late because of its high Christology), as well as how technical a formula this is. Acts 2:38 demonstrates that other baptismal formulae were also used in the earliest stages of Christianity. Jesus has already spoken of God as his Father (Matt 11:27; 24:36), of himself as the Son (11:27; 16:27; 24:36), and of blasphemy against God’s work in himself as against the Spirit (12:28).

28:20a Teaching obedience to all of Jesus’ commands forms the heart of disciple making. Evangelism must be holistic. If non-Christians are not hearing the gospel and not being challenged to make a decision for Christ, then the church has

disobeyed one part of Jesus' commission. If new converts are not faithfully and lovingly nurtured in the whole counsel of God's revelation, then the church has disobeyed the other part. Key implications for preaching appear here. There must be a balance between evangelistic proclamation and relevant exposition of all parts of God's Word, including the more difficult material best reserved for the mature (cf. 1 Cor 2:1–5 with 2:6–10). So, too, the ministries of the church overall must reflect a healthy balance of "outreach" and "inreach." Individuals who have differing gifts should be encouraged to expend most of their energies developing their strengths, whether evangelizing or nurturing, speaking or serving. Nevertheless, Jesus calls all Christians to be both witnesses and disciplers.

Jesus' words further demonstrate that Christian ethics and morality should first of all focus on Jesus' teaching, even though the Old Testament still remains relevant, as one sees how it is fulfilled in Christ (Matt 5:17–20), and even though the rest of the New Testament remains relevant as further explanation of the significance of Christ and his teachings. But the testimony of the Gospels and the commands Jesus issued (of which more are found in Matthew than in Mark, Luke, or John) must comprise the central core of Christian faith and proclamation.

28:20b Matthew closes his Gospel with Jesus' promise to be spiritually present with his followers until the end of this age, that is, until his return, when he will once again be present bodily (although "the end of the age" might be an idiom roughly equivalent to forever). John describes how Jesus had explained this provision in much more detail as the ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 13–17). Acts 2 will describe the decisive moment of the fulfillment of this promise at Pentecost. Matthew chooses to leave his readers here. The disciples represent everyone in the church to which he writes and, derivatively, everyone who professes to follow Christ in any age. The Lord is now risen! He calls his people to become disciple makers, and he promises to be with them irrespective of their successes or failures. Verse 20b forms an inclusio with v. 18, which indicates the central focus of Jesus' closing words. Despite the Great Commission, Matthew wants to end his Gospel centering more on Christ's attributes than on the disciples' task. Verses 18–20 link back with 1:23 to frame the entire Gospel with references to Immanuel— God with us. In Jesus, God remains with us for now and eternity! What more do we need to persevere in Christian living? We must go out and obey his commission. But the final word of the Gospel remains Christ-centered. Even when we fail, he remains faithful.