

The Great Commission

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[0:00] Well, good evening, everyone. The last time I preached in this church, I preached to one person, so this is a huge advance. So Gary gets full credit for listening in person to that sermon over the summer, but it's a great privilege to be with you tonight.

We heard the song, How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds, and it reminds me of a story told of John Newton. John Newton exercised a long ministry in the city of London, and John Newton preached until his early 80s.

And at that particular point, his sight had failed, his memory had gone, and when he preached, he would have an assistant in the pulpit with him to point at the manuscript as to where he should continue to read.

And at one point, Newton said the phrase, Jesus Christ is precious. He paused. Newton then said again, Jesus Christ is precious.

His servant to his left said, Mr. Newton, you've said that again. He said, I know I said it again, and I'll say it a third time. Jesus Christ is precious. Now let us sing how sweet the name of Jesus sounds, a hymn that he himself had written many years earlier.

[1:12] And as we commence our time together, I'd like us to remind ourselves of how precious Jesus is to us. Because if we understand how precious he is, if we value him, if we appreciate him, if we have recognized who he is and what he has done, when we come to the various commands of Scripture, they will be joyful commands, not burdens.

They will be a pleasure and not a trial. Because this evening, Graham has asked me if I would speak to you on the text at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 28 and verses, well, I'll read verses 16 to 20.

But before I read that passage, let me just remind you of a statement that I heard many years ago. When I was going to church, not yet a Christian, I would go to Buclue Free Church in the morning, which is just across the meadows from here, and I would go to Holy Root Abbey at night, which was along London Road.

And the minister there was James Phillip. He exercised a very long ministry in Edinburgh. And one thing that Mr. Phillip often said, he said, the imperatives of the faith are based on the indicatives of grace.

So imperatives are commands. But indicatives are statements. And if we understand the statements of faith, of grace, what we believe, that Jesus Christ died, that he was buried, that he rose on the third day, and that he is therefore to be proclaimed to all the nations.

[2:45] So the foundations are not how well we keep the commands of God, but the foundations are what God has done for us. And if we recognize what God has done for us, we will then naturally want to tell others, share this good news.

So this command at the very end of the gospel comes in the light of the death of Jesus, the burial of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

So that is our foundation, what Jesus has done, who he is, and what we now enjoy as his people. Matthew 28 at verse 16.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. But when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, We had two readings earlier.

We had that remarkable reading from Isaiah chapter 45, which contains verse 22, Look unto me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is none else.

[4:19] We had the parable of the great banquet from Luke, which tells us that all is now ready, and that the multitude is to be invited to this table, to this table of blessing, to this overflowing table of bounty.

So there you have these two pictures of a worldwide invitation, of a worldwide celebration, in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, that there is something that God has done that relates to every man, woman, and child, every nation, every tribe, every tongue.

So it's not surprising, therefore, when Jesus leaves this earth, that he leaves us his people with this command, that we are to go and tell this world that they are invited, that they are welcome, that there is a banquet that is prepared, that there is an invitation that is set out, and that we, like the servants in that parable, we are to follow the master's commands, to go wherever, to go wherever he sends us, and to tell that the invitation is out, to the highways, to the hedges, you know, to the lame, to the blind, to whoever we meet, here, and to the ends of the earth.

I just want to introduce you to a famous character from history. I'm a student of history, that's why I came here as it was many years ago. I wanted to study the history of Scotland, and it's taken me so long, I've just decided to stay.

There was a man called Robert Morrison. Morrison was half English and half Scottish, he had a Scottish name, and he grew up in Northumberland, and he felt a profound call to go to China.

[6:08] So, now, let me just put you in context here. At this particular stage, William Carey had already gone to India, that was a first, but no Protestant missionary had ever gone to China.

Just didn't happen. There were no British ships that would carry a missionary to China. You see, the trade with China was so valuable, the last thing you would want is Christians to get in the way of making money.

You know, opium, for example, was a great way of making money. You don't want Christians to come into the equation, and the last thing that you would want, of course, would be Chinese people to become Christians. That would really spoil a good business venture.

But Morrison had this sense of call, and he was undiminished. So, instead of, he couldn't travel from Britain to China, but he could travel to the United States, and he could travel from the United States to China.

And when he bought his ticket and explained what he was going to do, the booking agent asked him this. He said, Do you really expect to make an impression on the idolatry of the great Chinese empire?

[7:15] To which he replied, No, sir, but I expect God will. So here was a man who had faith, and he said he prayed a prayer, and this is, I would caution you against the prayers that you pray, because you need to be very careful about the prayers that you pray, because if you pray certain prayers, watch out for the way in which they might be answered.

He prayed, God, send me to that part of the mission field, where the difficulties are the greatest, and to all human appearances the most insurmountable.

God answered that prayer, sent Robert Morrison to Canton, China. We know it as Guangzhou. It's one of the coastal cities right near Hong Kong in southern China. Now, at this point, no Protestant missionary had ever been sent to China, and Morrison goes and spends 27 years in China.

And you might think, Wow, that's a long time to go. He taught himself Chinese. He wrote a Chinese-English dictionary, a six-volume Chinese-English dictionary. He translated the Bible into Chinese.

But 27 years, he saw only 10 converts. And you might think, at the end of 27 years, not too much to show for it. Not too much fruit.

[8:31] Not too much blessing. We'll come back to Morrison in a moment. But there was a man who heard the call and went. He heard the Great Commission and recognized it for what it was, a command.

And you see, when we read the Bible, we need to read the Bible and understand what is being said to us. If there's a statement, we need to believe it. If there's a promise, we need to cherish it.

But if there's a command, we need to obey it. And here we have an impossible command. But notice that the impossible command comes in a greater context.

Because this impossible command to go and make disciples of all nations comes within the greater impossibility of the early part of chapter 28 of Matthew.

After Sabbath at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake. For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.

[9:35] His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him, they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, And do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.

He is not here. He has risen, just as he said. So in order to appreciate the impossible command, let us first appreciate the impossible event.

That Jesus Christ died, he was buried, and on the third day of the week, he rose from the dead.

Now, I'm not a medical doctor, but dead people have a tendency to stay dead.

Dead people have a tendency to stay silent. But Jesus rose from the dead, and the risen living Jesus is now speaking. Dead people tended to stay dead 2,000 years ago.

It's not a modern phenomenon. It tended to occur that way, that when people died, they were buried. That was the end of the story. But in Jesus' case, in each of the gospel accounts, Matthew 27, the crucifixion, is followed by Matthew 28.

[10:45] Mark 15, the crucifixion, is followed by Mark 16. Luke 23, crucifixion, is followed by Luke 24. And John chapter 19 is followed by John chapter 20 and 21.

Jesus died, and yet there is another chapter. That's impossible. And yet God delights in doing the impossible. And that's our indicative.

Jesus Christ is alive. Jesus Christ is risen. And the risen living Jesus speaks. And he speaks with all power, and he speaks with all authority.

So the impossible event is the foundation for this impossible command. And let's look more closely exactly at what Jesus is saying here.

Because it really comes down to three different statements. We have this impossible command, which we'll call the Great Commission, but it's comprised of three different propositional statements.

[11:46] We have a great claim, we have a great command, and we have a great companion. Verse 18, the great claim. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

The Bible makes quite clear that Jesus is the one through whom all things are created. Jesus is the one through whom all things are sustained.

Jesus is the redeemer of mankind, and it will ultimately redeem all things. And he therefore can say with honesty and with integrity that all power, all authority rests with him.

So when he gives a command, he has the resources to carry that command out. When he commissions, he has the resources to make certain that those who are commissioned are equipped, enabled.

There's never a time where Jesus makes a command where he doesn't accompany the command with the resources. That indeed would be completely impossible. But Jesus has all power.

[12:58] Jesus has all authority. He's the king of kings. He's the lord of lords. And we know who he is. And we know what he has done. So the work of the gospel has been done.

All that is left to us is to say and to tell and to show. So the great claim, and then that's followed by the great command. Therefore, go.

And that connection word, therefore. We go because of who he is. We go because of what he has done. We go because of the authority that has been invested in him.

And therefore, he can tell us to go forth in his name. But notice the scope. Go and make disciples of all the nations.

Not some, not most. Not those that are near at hand. Not those that are inclined to the message. But all peoples. All nations.

[14:00] All tribes. All tongues. That we are to go and not make converts. But this word disciple is a much bigger word than a convert. We're not just trying to persuade people to think certain things or to accept certain propositions.

But we want to see followers of Jesus in every land, in every nation. We want to see men and women and young and old. We want to see them consecrated to Christ. Trusting in him. Believing in him. And walking in his footsteps. That's what we are. If you're a Christian here tonight, you're a disciple. He's the teacher. You're the learner. He's the king. You're the subject. He is the one who has offered sacrifice on your behalf so that you can be made pure. You can be made clean. He's in charge. He's in control. So we make disciples of all the nations. And you think, Jesus, don't you realize who you're talking to?

[15:03] Don't you realize that you're talking to the disciples? These are the people that are slow to understand. These are the people that are so inconsistent. in their Christian witness.

They get it wrong so often. They stumble so regularly. And doesn't Jesus realize what we are like? We're not the wise.

We're not the strong. We're not the consistent. Is he indeed entrusting the evangelism of the world into the hands of us, his people? Because you would think, well, he's placing it in very unsteady hands.

He's placing it on a very insecure footing. Or is he doing something that he knows what he's doing? Does he actually know what he's doing?

Because, you see, when he uses instruments like us, when he uses weak instruments to accomplish strong purpose, it becomes obvious that it's not about us.

[16:01] It must be about the one that we are speaking of. When he uses foolish instruments like we so often are to accomplish his all-wise plans, it must be his wisdom.

And when he can take a small group of people, 11 disciples at that particular time, and when they can turn the world upside down, when they can transform the existing Roman Empire, when they can bring the gospel to the very heart of the empire in Rome, and from Rome to everywhere. And we see today that throughout the world today, the 21st century is the century that has witnessed the greatest advance of the Christian gospel.

Today, there are more people in the world who are Christians than ever at any point in the past.

There's also greater levels of persecution in the 21st century than at any point in the past.

The 20th century was the most dangerous century to be a Christian. That will be eclipsed by the 21st century. The 20th century was the greatest century of advance in the Christian gospel.

[17:09] That will, too, be eclipsed in this, the 20th, 21st century. So the great claim that he has all authority in heaven and on earth, this great command where he says, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And this word name is so important because whenever the Bible speaks of the name of God, what is included there is everything. When we speak of his name, we speak of his authority, we speak of his dignity, we speak of his honor, we speak of his character, we speak of his nature.

All of this is tied up in his name. That's why the commandments are so clear that we are not to misuse the name of God. We are not to disrespect God or disrespect his name.

Why? Because his name encapsulates his nature and his character. So the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a powerful name.

You see, when the name of God goes forth, watch out. Watch out because people that previously were hostile might come to find themselves embracing this gospel.

[18:21] Those who previously may have been indifferent may find their hearts strangely warmed to believe in this message. it doesn't seem to make sense, does it? How is it possible that even in that first century that this message would even go beyond the walls of Jerusalem, let alone beyond the confines of Judea, let alone into Samaria, the neighboring district?

But how could it possibly get into Europe? How could it possibly reach the Gentiles who know nothing about the Old Testament? And yet, here we are, 21st century, Bruntsfield, Edinburgh. How is it possible that we've come to this point? How is it possible that the gospel still continues to change hearts and change lives? Maybe that comes to our final point in the Great Commission, namely the Great Companion.

Because not only do we have a claim that Jesus makes, not only do we have a command that Jesus gives, but he says that he will accompany us on this journey. That when we go, we never go alone.

He always goes with us. But I think, sadly, the opposite can also be the case. If we don't go, if we don't obey, then we're left on our own.

[19:45] We're left on our own devices, we're left on our own resources, we're left with our own wisdom, because if we obey this command, he promises to be with us. But if we disregard or disobey this command, we cannot take for granted that he will be with us, guiding us, leading us, protecting us.

So the claim, the command, and the companion, powerful and transformative. But I'd like to notice the, and this is taking us to the very end of the Bible, is if we have the impossible event, the impossible command, we have the impossible fulfillment.

You see, John, if you think of the book of Revelation as a curtain that is drawn back, just briefly, the curtain is drawn back and you get a sight into what's behind or into what's ahead.

And John the Apostle is given encouragement because the people of God are experiencing persecution. The curtain is pulled back in Revelation 7 and verse 9.

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count. A great multitude. You think of the great banquet. You think of the great invitation in Isaiah 45, 22.

[21:05] Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth for I am God and there is none. And now John sees a multitude. But where does this multitude come from? Oh, well, it comes from every nation, every tribe, every people, and every language.

Now where are they gathered? They're gathered in front of the throne. And what are they doing? They are gathering there, celebrating and rejoicing that salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

You see, there is an impossible conclusion or an impossible fulfillment that God has this command that he gives to his church and he pulls back the curtain and says, this is what it's going to look like. This is what it's going to look like when all the nations are gathered, when all the tribes are gathered, when all the tongues are represented. They will be gathered together in heaven worshipping the Lamb.

Why? Because the people of God have taken this command seriously. They have gone and they have told. Let me give you a bit of the setting that we find ourselves in in the 21st century.

[22:13] Statistics tell us that every year in Scotland, 120 churches shut their doors. In 1966, the year that I was born, the Church of Scotland had a membership of 1.2 million people.

That membership has dropped up to 325,000 in the year 2018. That just gives you an idea that the Christian cause seems to be receding in Scotland.

So when we say to go, that's not just to go to the ends of the earth, but that's to go to your corner, your street corner, to your neighborhood, to your family, to your friends, to your colleagues.

Why? Because the cause of Scotland is at a low ebb right now. 120 churches shutting their doors each and every year. But let me give you one story of encouragement.

Back in 2000, we had a church on the Royal Mile. The Free Church has a church on the Royal Mile called St. Columbus Free Church. Year 2000, the congregation reduced to about 30 people.

[23:21] There were no children. There was one elder. And the conventional wisdom said, this church is too small. This church is too old. Let's combine this small congregation with one of the other Edinburgh congregations and shut the door.

Well, there was a friend of ours, of mine, who I know very well, and he spoke and he persuaded the church to give it one more try. 2001, they call a young man at the time, Derek Lament, from up

north.

Now, Derek left a very large, thriving congregation in Easter Ross to come down to this small gathering in Edinburgh. It doesn't really make much sense, does it? To leave a large church that's thriving, come to a small church.

To leave a church where you have an unlimited appointment, you can stay there for as long as you want, and to be told, well, you might get five years out of this if you're lucky. Well, the rest of the story, of course, is not so much about the people or the personalities, but it's about the God who was preached and the gospel that was proclaimed.

So today, more than 200 people would gather at the same church on the Royal Mile, but from that church, three new churches have been planted. And if you sum up all those four churches, now over 700 worshipers may be gathering every Sunday worshipping Jesus.

[24:40] So it just goes to show what you can do if you have a Great Commission mentality for Edinburgh. You'll say to yourself, okay, we've got a small gathering here today, but let's say all the folks of Bruntsfield were gathered together in this church.

You would say, well, there's a healthy church here, right, in the heart of one of the neighborhoods in Edinburgh. And it wouldn't make much sense, would it, to send some people out of this congregation to another place in town, because that would make this church weaker.

That would mean there'd be fewer people. So, you know, you don't need to be an accountant to kind of put that together, but God has a way of making up deficits. God has a way of replacing people.

And God has a way of making certain that he is no person's debtor. When we go forth in faith, he has a way of multiplying things in a way that we cannot imagine.

And I'd like to encourage us to consider the Great Commission. And maybe for that means some of you that might mean to consider leaving your place, your place of birth, leaving the place of comfort, maybe going to a distant place.

[25:49] But for many of us, it might mean going to a different neighborhood. It might mean considering, well, actually, you know, there's quite a few of us in a particular part of town. Maybe we could start a church there.

Maybe we could reverse this 120 churches closing each year. Maybe we could see 120 new churches starting each year or more. But if you're interested in the global situation, we're told in Revelation 7 that a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language was gathered. The missiologists tell us that 17,441 people groups exist in the world, of which 7,414 are unreached.

That means people from those groups don't know about Jesus. They have no means of knowing about Jesus. They were like the Chinese people 200 or so years ago when Robert Morrison left the UK to go to China.

They had previously no knowledge of Jesus. Now, I mentioned earlier that Morrison left, spent 27 years, died in China, and at the end of the story, he had only 10 people who had come to faith.

[27:06] But I tell you what he did was he laid a foundation. So in just a generation later, a man called Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission. And scores of missionaries went out from the UK and throughout the world to China with the gospel and brought the message of the gospel not just to the coastal areas like Canton, but brought it into the inland districts of China.

So many, that by 1939, I think the high water mark was there were over 1,300 China Inland Missionaries in China. The story continues until after the war.

Remember Chairman Mao? He expelled all the foreign missionaries, all the foreign missions. Christianity was a Western religion and if we get rid of the Westerners, we'll get rid of Christianity. Probably in 1949, there were about a million Chinese believers. And Mao succeeded in a sense that there were no longer a million Chinese Christians. But he succeeded in a way that he never expected because there's 100 million Chinese Christians today.

But it all began with a man called Robert Morrison who felt a call to go to China. He wrote a dictionary, translated the Bible, laid the foundation for all future missionary work in China.

[28:28] And God blessed that work, God blessed that worker so that today, China is one of the great sources of missionaries now. Not just receiving, but sending people all over.

And what you find in any city center congregation in the United States or in the United Kingdom, that there are Chinese people that are coming to faith. They're coming to church.

They want to share their faith with their families, with their friends. Why? Because 200 years ago, a man heard the call, went to China, gave his life in the service of Jesus.

So the great command is to go, to make disciples of all nations. Jesus says, all authority on heaven and on earth rests on him.

And when we go to our neighbors, to our friends, to the ends of the earth, we are guaranteed that Jesus Christ goes with us. Watch out what happens when we take that command seriously.

[29:30] Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, said, the great commission is not an option to be considered. It is a command to be obeyed.

Let us pray. Father, I thank you for each one of us gathered here today. And I pray for this church. I give you thanks for its vitality. We give you thanks for the many lives that it has already touched.

And I pray that you might give this congregation of your people wisdom to see how they may contribute to the work of the great commission.

How they might give, how they might pray, how they might go. Maybe that work might be in the city of Edinburgh. Maybe it might be into surrounding districts of this city. Maybe it might be to different areas of the country of Scotland.

But maybe it might be that some from this place might go forth to some of those 7,400 people groups who know nothing about Jesus to go and to tell them that there is a banquet that is prepared.

[30:31] To go and tell them that there's an invitation that is given by the King of Heaven that they are to look to Jesus. And in looking to Jesus they will be saved. So I pray for this congregation.

I pray for its leadership. I pray for its membership. And I pray, Lord, that you might be pleased to bless this people, to multiply them, that they in turn might be a blessing in the lives of others. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.