

OUR CALLING: MAKE DISCIPLES

SERIES: MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM: WHY ARE WE HERE?

Danny Hall

A few days ago the war in Iraq that we had been anticipating for weeks began, and we have been immersed in 24-7 live coverage of it on TV. In the midst of that we had the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament, and tonight the Oscars will be going on. The juxtaposition of these two icons of pop culture against the backdrop of the war illustrates a tension we're all feeling: we somehow need to go on with normal life even in the midst of such grave times. As Christians, what are we to do day by day? I wish I knew what to do about all of this, but I don't. So I remember the call of Jesus. What does he ask of us as believers, whose highest loyalty is to him and his kingdom?

We are in the midst of a series of messages on God's heart for the world. We have been examining what God has called us to do: to love the world as he loves the world. We have been reminded in Scripture that God has always loved the world, that from the beginning he intended to offer salvation to the world, and that salvation was realized in the person of Jesus Christ who died for our sins. God therefore wants that expression of his love to touch the lives of all people.

Starting with the last message (Discovery Paper 4853), we have been exploring the implications of that for us as followers of Christ. In that message we looked at Matthew 9:35-38, and we asked God to show us how to open our eyes and see both the need of the people around us and the wonderful harvest that it represents.

At this point perhaps you are asking, "God, if you give me a heart for the world, then what shall I do? Where shall I go?" So we are going to turn to a very familiar passage of Scripture, Matthew 28:16-20, the Great Commission, the last command of Jesus before he returned to his Father. That command is also recorded in Mark 16 and Acts 1, but the version of it found here in Matthew 28 is probably its most noted and pointed expression. Let's read it:

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Let's take a moment to consider the context of this wonderful passage. First, this is Jesus' final moment with his disciples. He has called them to be his followers and has invested more than three years in their lives. He has taken them with him and trained them, and they have watched him live and minister. He has been growing them up into people who will be leaders of his kingdom. On the eve of his death they sat under his teaching, recorded in a passage of Scripture we call the Upper Room Discourse, John 13-16 (see Discovery Papers 4729-4740). Jesus gave clear, detailed instructions to prepare them for inheriting the leadership of the kingdom of God, which he was about to entrust to them. They wrestled with some hard teaching he gave them, then they watched as he was tried and went to the cross and died for them. Three days later, on that blessed Sunday morning, they encountered the risen Christ, and the hopes that had been dashed at his death were renewed in great joy at his resurrection. Now they have walked with him through a number of post-resurrection meetings before this final moment when he will return to the Father.

Let's examine the text. Matthew records that the eleven disciples proceed to a mountain that Jesus has designated, and when he comes to meet them, they worship him. They have recognized that he is the conqueror of death and the Lord they want to follow. But amazingly, some are doubtful! Even after all the post-resurrection appearances, there is still uncertainty and confusion in some of their hearts. "What is going to happen to us?" They rejoice that he has conquered death, but there are still questions about where they are going. In fact, they will not fully comprehend this until a number of days later at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit will come upon them. Then their eyes will be opened, their understanding deepened and enriched. It will all begin to make sense to them. But at this point what life means for them is not totally clear. So in this final moment Jesus gives them this great commission, this word of encouragement and command. Let's take a look at his command.

What disciple-making is all about

The command itself is simply “Make disciples,” but along with that there is an assumption of going. The word “go” can be understood a couple of different ways. It can be understood as having gone; since they have gone out, they will then make disciples as they go. It also can be understood as a direct command to go. But in this particular construction it is something on which the main command to make disciples is dependent. In order to make disciples, you have to go. Otherwise, it’s not possible to make disciples. So what does Jesus mean when he says to go? He is implying active engagement with our world and the people in it. Disciple-making does not happen any other way.

Our going and engaging eventually extends to all the nations. The word translated “nations” does not refer to national boundaries or political entities, but ethnicities or peoples. The commission to make disciples is for every people, every ethnic group everywhere. So there is an assumption in this command that we will get up from our pews, get out of our comfort zones, and engage our world that we live in, and by extension also be involved in engaging peoples all over the world.

This command to make disciples then raises the question, what is a disciple? As I mentioned earlier in this series, I am enjoying reading a fine book called *Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard. He has a wonderful exposition of this very passage. He defines discipleship as apprenticeship, which I find helpful.

“An apprentice of Jesus...is to be one of those who have trusted Jesus with their whole life, so far as they understand it. Because they have done so they want to learn everything he has to teach them about life in the kingdom of God now and forever, and they are constantly with him to learn this.” (1)

As an apprentice of Jesus we give our whole life to him, wanting to learn everything there is to know about him and what it means to live as kingdom people. We can’t do that unless we are walking with him.

Now, we are to be involved in bringing people into this process of becoming disciples of Jesus. And there is an interesting requirement in Jesus’ command to make disciples: the command is given *to* his disciples. So in order to make disciples, we have to be disciples ourselves. We have to have committed our own lives fully to Christ, and to be involved ourselves in the process of understanding who Jesus is and what it means to follow him, to live as kingdom people, to live in communion and fellowship with him.

Jesus goes on and qualifies his command with two descriptive phrases: “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” Baptizing and teaching explain what it means to make a disciple. Let’s examine those.

The word baptize means to completely immerse one thing in something else. Of course baptism has come down to us as a very important ritual of our faith that symbolizes our commitment to Jesus Christ, being buried with him in death and rising in him to new life. But I suggest that the real importance of this command has to do with what God is actually doing in the life of the believer. If we understand this concept of immersion in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I think it will broaden our understanding of what Jesus is commanding us to do here.

To be in the name of something means to be in all of who that person is and all they stand for. So I believe that when we talk about our baptizing people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are actually encouraging them to be immersed in the total reality of who God is. This implies introducing people to the wonderful reality of a personal relationship with God. Dallas Willard speaks of “immersing the apprentices at all levels of growth in the Trinitarian presence” (2), which simply says that being a disciple of Jesus means being someone who is in a personal relationship with the living God, fully immersed in the reality of all God’s Trinitarian glory: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The second qualifier Jesus gives is teaching believers how to live as Christ-followers. Once again Dallas Willard’s words are helpful: “Transforming disciples inwardly, in such a way that doing the words and deeds of Christ is not the focus but is the natural outcome or side effect” (3). What he means is that what we are to do is help people to learn more and more about who Jesus is, to develop their personal relationship and walk with him. Jesus isn’t focused on a

little list of do's and don'ts, but on growing an intimate, personal relationship with him. Out of a growing understanding of who Jesus is, of his teachings, his commands, a commitment to obey Jesus flows, as people wrestle with the application in their real-life settings.

So what are the commands of Jesus? There are many, but Jesus himself liked to summarize his commands in certain general statements. Among them are these: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and out of that, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). And in that last discourse to his disciples he said: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35.)

As we live in relationship with Christ, he helps us to see the implications of this. Let me illustrate from a personal experience I had back in my seminary days. One of my friends and fellow seminarians was working at a church, and there was a man in his church who was looking for someone to disciple him. My friend asked me if I'd be willing to do it. I had never disciplined someone I didn't know, but my friend was sort of overwhelmed with all that he had going on, and he thought that this man and I would be a good match. So I met this man, and sure enough, he seemed like a great guy who really had a heart for the Lord, and it would be worthwhile to spend some time together. So we began studying the Bible together. We started with the gospel of John. After reading through the prologue and getting into the story of Jesus, I told him to finish reading chapter 3. Next time we got together we would talk about what God was showing as we explored this chapter together. When we came back together, I asked him, "Well, what did God teach you from that chapter?" He said, "You know, what God really taught me was that I need to treat my wife better."

Have you ever read the third chapter of John? Have you ever seen anything in that chapter about treating your wife better? So I asked him, "Where did you get that?" He said, "You know that part where John the Baptist says, 'He must increase, but I must decrease'?" As I read that, it became clear to me that most of my life is about me. I need to decrease and let Jesus increase, and the place I have to start is how I treat my wife."

That was a wonderful lesson to me. When we focus on our relationship with Christ and the glory of who he is, the commands of Jesus start to flow, our hearts are changed, and we want to obey. That's what it means to make disciples--to help people find Christ, become immersed in who he is, and out of that, learn what he is commanding them to do, and then live it out.

This passage has bookends, so to speak, two wonderful promises that bracket Jesus' command. In verse 18 Jesus says, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." At the end of verse 20 he says, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The One in whom all authority resides, who has the keys to the kingdom, the King of kings and Lord of lords--this is the One who says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." What a wonderful promise for us in our calling to be disciple-makers, engaging our world, loving our world, bringing people to Christ. We are not alone in this, but we have with us the One who has all the resources of heaven itself. He is energizing us, caring, and directing us as we go.

(Back in the first story in Matthew, Joseph is wrestling over what to do because Mary, his fiancée, is pregnant. But the angel comes and tells him not to worry, because she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit in a wonderful miracle that God is doing. Her Son will be called Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:18-23). The gospel of Matthew begins with the promise that God will be with us, and it closes with "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." That's what the story of Jesus is about.)

Therefore, we can be disciple-makers, called by God to make a difference in our world, proclaimers of the gospel of his love. We have God with us, so we need not shrink back in fear. We have his comfort, his strength, his guidance, all his resources.

Let me share with you five implications of this passage for our practical living.

Living for others

First, as we follow Jesus and seek to observe all that he has commanded us, there are many things we must be doing, but our primary calling is to make disciples. Undergirding all the things that we are commanded to do in loving our world is Jesus' desire for people to come to know him.

I came to my office early this morning, and permitted myself to do what I always tell myself not to do: I checked my email. But on my email was a thank you letter, in essence, from Bread of Life Ministries, and in it was a great illustration of this very point.

Bread of Life EPA is so grateful to Peninsula Bible Church for its extraordinary support. Not only was there an enormously generous financial outpouring for the Joy to the World extravaganza, but also so very many of you have volunteered over these many months. It's precisely this collaboration that speaks of the example that Christians are mandated to walk out on a daily basis as a practical way of life. How pleased God must be when he looks down on us in this regard. While many nonprofits in the socioeconomically challenged community of East Palo Alto closed their doors, Bread of Life EPA continues to address the basic survival needs of the homeless, the poor, the elderly, the chronically ill, the unemployed, families with young children, the majority of which are single-female-led households, at-risk children and youth, and more. These people were ministered to so very powerfully by not only our staff but also many, many PBC members, that we had over twenty people open up their hearts to accept Christ during the Christmas celebration. Oh yes, we serve much more than delicious hot meals. One can find love, dignity, respect, encouragement, and the love of God in generous proportions.

What a wonderful example of this principle! We are called to obey Christ and love the world, and it is absolutely our calling to be men and women who care about the poor and needy. But to be able to do that in the name of Christ and along with it bring to them the wonderful hope of transformation in Christ, to make disciples as we obey him, that is a wonderful and great calling!

Second, if we are to be disciple-makers, we have to live for others. You may be getting tired of my saying this over and over again, message after message, but get used to it, because I'm not going to stop. We can't be disciple-makers unless we are willing to get out of ourselves. This is what it means to be a follower of Christ. If we are going to be engaged with people, that assumes that we have to be less self-absorbed. That has to be part of the calculation of our priorities, of our approach to life, our decisions. And of course that will manifest itself somewhat differently for each one of us.

The third implication flows right out of the second. Jesus' primary methodology (and Paul's as well) was to have his disciples with him. We have to do this too. Therefore we have to spend time with people. As we re-order our lives to live for others, part of what it means is to invest our lives in certain others whom God brings to us. This requires sacrifice. We must be willing to listen patiently, to sometimes graciously and lovingly work with people over a long period of time. That's what it takes for them to overcome all the barriers to finding the love of Christ that are in their own lives.

Fourth, Jesus ministered to many around him, but invested in just a few. We cannot change the whole world or reach everybody, but we can ask God to show us who we can invest in and how we can best do that. One of the reasons we sometimes shy away from the prospect of making disciples is that the whole thing seems so overwhelming. "Make disciples of all the nations? I can't do that. I can't even win my whole neighborhood." And sometimes the overpowering sense of opposition or evil, or the state of people's lives, is just too much for us. Well, God hasn't called us to change the whole world. He calls us to be sensitive to his leading us to the people he brings around us, to open our eyes to the needs that are close. God asks us to ask, "Who can I invest in? Who can I give my life to in order to help them find Christ and grow in him?"

Finally, this calling given by our Lord vests in us the responsibility for extending the love of God to all the peoples of the world. We are going to explore this topic in a little more in depth in the next message. But in brief, we have a responsibility to see that disciple-making, the proclamation of the gospel, goes on in the whole world. This command is for all peoples. So you and I have to explore what the implications are for us. Maybe God will call us to go someplace far away from our normal, safe habitat. Maybe God will encourage us to go on short mission trips. Maybe

God will lead us to simply pray for the world, or invest financial support in those who go. There are different ways to be involved, but this command cannot be taken seriously if we do not take seriously that God has called us to see that the gospel goes to all peoples. And as we explore and come humbly before God and ask for his leadership, he will begin to show us how it is to work out in our own lives.

NOTES

- (1) Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, © 2002, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 241.
- (2) Willard, p. 240.
- (3) Willard, p. 240.

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