

Why We're Here: Understanding our Mission

Making Disciple-Making Disciples (Matthew 28:16-20)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on January 25, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ In the past couple of weeks, we've been in a short series on our church's mission statement. Our hope has been to start the year off right by re-centering ourselves around our shared mission, our common purpose, the reason why we've committed ourselves as members to Houston Chinese Church – this local manifestation of the larger universal Church.
 - ▶ *What is that mission? What's that purpose? Why do we exist? Why are we here?* It's to make God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations. We based that statement off two key verse in the Gospel of Matthew. The **Great Commandment** that tells us to love the Lord our God with all that we are and all that we have and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt. 22:37-39).
 - And the **Great Commission** found in our passage today. This is where Jesus, on the verge of ascending to the Father, gives his disciples their standing orders. They are to go and make disciples of all nations.
- ❖ **So you put the Great Commandment and the Great Commission together and you have yourself a pretty great mission statement for a church.** Now it's so important that we pursue them together. Because if our mission to make disciples is not motivated by a devoted love for God and a genuine love for neighbor, then disciple-making easily turns into this task, this burden we take upon ourselves. Our disciples turn into projects. Disciple-making is just this thing we're supposed to do. And it's no longer driven by love.
- ❖ If that happens, if our mission to pursue the Great Commission, is not motivated by great love for God and others, then it gains nothing. We are nothing (cf. 1 Cor. 13:3). This is why we've been stressing the last two weeks the importance for us to be **God-loving disciples** – who treasure God, who cherish him, who value him as infinitely greater than any other thing on earth. And **compassionate disciples** – who care for others with a merciful, sacrificial love that's rooted in our love for Christ.
 - ▶ Next week we're going to kick off Missions Month where we'll be talking about making disciples **among all nations**, to the ends of the earth, especially to the unreached and unengaged peoples of the world. **But this morning I want to focus on the task of disciple-making in general. And I emphasize the general.** Because since I've been back for almost four years, I've picked up on a few observations in our community – a lot encouraging but some disconcerting.
- ❖ Now I've definitely been encouraged by the renewed emphasis I've seen on discipleship. Having grown up in this church, I didn't get that same sense. I don't recall that much talk about being discipled and making disciples. But now I constantly receive emails from people asking for help to find a discipler or someone to disciple. The interest is there. **And it's honestly a pastor's dream to be in a church where discipleship is part of the culture, part of the DNA.** I am so grateful for what God's been doing at HCC in this regard.
 - ▶ But having said that, I do want to point out two observations that concern me. I say this from the heart of a shepherd who loves the sheep. I'm concerned that for some people discipleship has become a specialty. And secondly it's become formulaic.

Two Disconcerting Observations

- ❖ **1) Discipleship has become a specialty instead of a generalized field.** It's like in medicine. How everyone might be a doctor, but then you have the hardcore ones who continue on and do fellowships in specific fields of specialization. So you end up with electrophysiology cardiologists who are these specialized physicians that focus only on the cells located only on your heart. That's it. That's their specialty.
 - ▶ I get a sense that's how some of us view discipleship. **We might all be Christians, but only the hardcore are specialized in making disciples.** They receive specialized training. I'm just a Christian. I'm not anyone's disciple or discipler. I'm not involved in discipleship. I'm just a general Christian like I'm just a general physician.

- ❖ But that's category mistake. **Every Christian is a disciple. If you're not a disciple, you're not a Christian.** A disciple is simply a *learner*. That's what the word literally means. It's to be a learner. And not in the sense of a student who sits in class and just absorbs information. In the 1st-century, people didn't enroll into this-or-that school and sit in class all day long. Rather they would commit to learning under this-or-that Teacher/Master. They would follow their Master all day long listening, learning, and imitating.
 - ▶ So if Jesus is your Master, if your desire is to listen and learn from him, to imitate him, then you *are* a disciple. You're *his* disciple. **So for Christians, the question is not whether you want to be a disciple or to get involved in discipleship. You already are. The real question is whether you're a faithful disciple.** The real question is whether your involvement in discipleship is active and intentional.

- ❖ I think the reason we have this impression of discipleship as this speciality focus for only certain Christians is because **2) discipleship in our churches has become formulaic.** We have a very specific picture of what it looks like to make a disciple, to disciple someone.
 - ▶ You have to be a number of years older than your disciple. You have to meet up one-on-one on a weekly or bi-weekly basis; for at least an hour; over a meal. You have to study some particular resource or book and cover these specific topics.

- ❖ Now don't get me wrong. If what I just described was happening all over the place in our church, then praise God Almighty! But my point is that what I described is just one form of discipleship, one way to make a disciple. Call it **life-on-life discipleship**. Where a more mature believer imparts both his life and doctrine onto a younger believer.
 - ▶ That's something I would encourage every Christian to get involved in. But if you have legitimate reasons why you can't commit to something like that in this season of life you're in – perhaps you just moved to a new city or had a baby or your work schedule just doesn't permit – that's still no excuse to put discipleship on hold. You don't just take a break from making disciples.

- ❖ I totally understand if you need to take a break from a particular *form* of disciple-making. **But you can't take a backseat to the Great Commission.** Faithfulness to Christ and his mission calls for your continued involvement in making disciples in some shape or form.

- ❖ **I think it helps if we understand discipleship as just a general term to describe what it means to be a Christian.** You're a follower of Jesus. You're a disciple. And think of disciple-making as an umbrella that encompasses both sharing the gospel (evangelism) and helping others grow spiritually.
 - ▶ So okay, you don't have time for life-on-life discipleship. But I think we'd all agree that every believer should still be involved in introducing others to Jesus and helping them follow after him. That's essentially what it means to disciple someone. If that's true, then you should be discipling your children, your colleagues, your classmates, your neighbors. You can disciple your Christian *and* non-Christian friends. **You can be and should be involved in *making and maturing* disciples.**

- ❖ **So if you're a Christian, you're both a disciple and a disciple-maker.** Again it's not a question of "*Do you want to be?*". That's what you are. The question is whether you're faithful at it.
 - ▶ If that's the case, what I want to do now is to show you three things from our text. I want to show you the power, the plan, and the promise. In vv19-20, Jesus gives us **the plan** to fulfill the Great Commission, and he sandwiches this plan with power and a promise. He mentions **the power** of his authority in v18 and **the promise** of his presence at the end of v20. So let's look at this more in depth.

The Power the Fuels the Great Commission

- ❖ Let's begin by consider the power that fuels the Great Commission and by extension what fuels the mission of our church. And that's the authority of the Risen Lord. **The sovereign, kingly, supreme authority of Christ Jesus the Lord is backing our mission to make God-loving, compassionate disciples among all nations.** We see this in vv16-18. Before we read it again, let me set the context.
 - ▶ Jesus, the Son of God, had taken on flesh and lived the life every one of us should have lived – in perfect obedience to God the Father. He just died the death every one of us deserves to die in penalty of our sins. He substituted himself in our place, on the cross, bearing its shame. He did this because he loves his Father and he loves us.
 - Now in the beginning of chapter 28, God raises Jesus from the dead on the first day of the week. And the women, the first witnesses, are instructed to tell the eleven remaining disciples to meet the Risen Lord in Galilee, the very region where he centered his earthly ministry.

- ❖ Pick up in v16, "¹⁶*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.*" This immediately raises questions. **Namely, who are the "some" that doubted?** Are we saying that some of the eleven disciples doubted? Even as they're staring at the Resurrected Lord?
 - ▶ Most commentators I read think the "some" refer to other brothers who were there besides the Eleven (cf. 28:10). But that's not conclusive. It's also suggested that the word for doubted is best translated as "hesitated". Some hesitated.

- ❖ It just demonstrates that the Resurrection was not something Jesus' followers were anticipating. Apparently it was still difficult for some to process. **And it just goes to show how the human heart can be so hardened by sin that just seeing something even as miraculous as the Resurrected Christ was not enough to immediately transform men of little faith into spiritual giants.** What was necessary was the Holy Spirit. They needed Pentecost to happen. They needed the Spirit to fall on them and give new hearts.
 - ▶ And that's the same today. People don't become disciples because they saw some miracle or had some transcendent, spiritual experience. No, they become Christians because the Holy Spirit falls on them giving new birth, new hearts, and genuine saving faith that overcomes all hesitation.

- ❖ Now let's read on in v18. "*And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."*" This is a staggering claim. **Jesus is either the most self-delusional, self-aggrandizing, egomaniac the world has ever seen or the most powerful, most sovereign being in the entire universe.** It's one or the other.
 - ▶ This word *authority* that Jesus uses is interesting. It's the word *exousia*. **To have *exousia* means to have power to do as you please by virtue of having the right to do as you please.** It's distinct from the word *dunamis*, which is translated as power or strength. So there are some people who are strong and powerful but lack *exousia*. And those who possess great *exousia* may not appear as powerful to the naked eye.
 - I heard a great illustration of this. Picture a football field. On this field are 22 men with great *dunamis*. They exude power and strength. Everyone can see that. But they're not the most powerful men on the field. That designation belongs to seven men dressed in black and white. Yes, they're much older and much smaller than those 22 other men. But they're more powerful because they have more than *dunamis*. They have *exousia*. They have authority.

- ❖ The good news for us is that Jesus not only has *dunamis*. He's been given *exousia*. The divine right to rule over heaven and earth – over all peoples, nations, and languages (cf. Dan. 7:13-14). **And that means you never have to worry about his power being usurped.** There is no greater authority to overrule him. There is nothing in heaven or on earth over which Jesus does not have absolute authority.
 - ▶ **And so when he sends you out as his disciples to go and make disciples, Jesus is sending you out with his own authority.** You carry with you a delegated authority. Which we need because, let's face it, we don't have *dunamis*. We're weak. We're nothing. But we have *exousia* – Jesus' absolute authority backing our mission.

- ❖ And that makes all the difference. **So whatever fear, whatever obstacle, whatever hesitation is preventing you from faithfully pursuing the mission to make disciples – know that Jesus is stronger.** You're afraid of what people might think of you if you actively try to make disciples in your workplace or campus? You're afraid of what it'll do to your reputation, your career advancement? Jesus has *all* authority. Don't worry. Don't fear. He has it under control. He knows what he's doing. You just have to be faithful to the mission.

The Plan to Fulfill the Great Commission

- ❖ What is this mission? What's the plan to fulfill the Great Commission? Read vv19-20. *“¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”*
 - ▶ Notice the “*therefore*” at the beginning of v19. Because Jesus has all authority over all the earth, he pushes us beyond the borders of one nation, one people group, one ethnicity – to all the nations, to all the earth. **His universal authority compels us on a universal mission to make disciples in his Name.**

- ❖ Now much as been written and discussed about how the only imperative (command) in vv19-20 is the verb “*make disciples*”. The rest of the verbs, *go*, *baptize*, and *teach* are all participles modifying the command to make disciples.
 - ▶ The reason this is even worth mentioning is because many have tried to argue that Jesus' emphasis is on making disciples and not on traveling someplace else to do it. So they'll translate v19, “*Therefore as you go about your life (wherever you are) make disciples.*” Now on one hand, that's a refreshing thought. **That means you don't have to become a foreign missionary to be directly involved in the Great Commission.** You can carry it out wherever you go.
 - But at same time, I think we're making too much of this if you take all the emphasis away from going someplace new where disciples are not found and not being made. It does say to make disciples *of all nations* after all. But let's save that discussion for next week when we begin Missions Month.

- ❖ **So the plan involves making disciples here in our city *and* aboard among all the peoples of the earth.** But how does it happen? What do we do? Remember as we said earlier, if you see disciple-making as a more general term, then it always begins with the proclamation of the gospel – the good news of God's grace in redeeming us in and through Christ Jesus.
 - ▶ We have to proclaim it in such a way as to invite people to repent and believe. And as we said earlier, it's the Holy Spirit's job to give people that new heart that generates faith and repentance. That's how someone becomes a disciple of Jesus.
 - And that's how we, the Church, are involved in **making disciples**. But it doesn't stop there. We still have to be involved in **maturing disciples**. And that involves three things: a) Identification with Christ, b) Instruction under Christ, and the c) Imitation of Christ.

Identification with Christ

- ❖ **First, we need to help disciples of Jesus to identify with him in the waters of baptism.** We're commanded to baptize them in the name of our Triune God. Notice it says *name* and not the *names* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So we believe in one God with one name who eternally exists in three distinct persons. We believe in a Trinity.

- ❖ And it literally says to baptize disciples *into* the name of the Triune God. **The emphasis is on entering *into* a relationship with God.** And the only reason you're in that relationship is because of the union you share with the Son – your identification with Christ. His death and resurrection are counted as yours.
 - ▶ And that's exactly what baptism is meant to symbolize. As you go under the water, you're identifying with Christ in his death. And as you're raised up, you're identifying with him in his resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3-4).

- ❖ **Baptism is a sign of your entrance into the inner life of the Triune God and into his covenant community, the Church.** It's also pledge of submission to Jesus as Lord and King. This is why we can't treat baptism as some formality or as something unimportant.
 - ▶ Listen, if you think having assurance of faith is important for Christians, if being a member of a church is important to you, then you should consider baptism as extremely important. **When this church baptize you, that's our affirmation that you're a genuine disciple of Jesus.** And from that day on, we, as a church, bear responsibility to help shape your discipleship and to keep you accountable to Christ.

- ❖ That's why in our church we only baptize believers. V19 says to baptize disciples, those already following. Make disciples first and then baptize them. **So we don't baptize the children of disciples if they're not disciples in their own right.** We don't try to make a big deal about that but we have clear convictions for why we don't practice infant baptism.
 - ▶ But bottomline, if you're a fairly new believer or you're not sure how to grow as a disciple, then let me ask: *Have you been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* That's your next step, which is really the first step.

Instruction under Christ

- ❖ **Second, the plan to fulfill the Great Commission calls for instructing disciples under the teachings of Christ.** V20 emphasizes teaching disciples to observe all that Jesus commanded. Note the stress on observing Jesus' instruction and not just comprehending it. I think a lot of us have no trouble learning and even accepting all that Jesus commanded – but observing all he commanded? Obeying it all? Now that's an entirely different matter.
 - ▶ And also notice that Jesus used the word *all*. Observe *all* that I have commanded you. **That means as his disciples we're in no position to pick and choose which aspects of his teaching we'll accept.** To be his disciple requires submitting to the whole counsel of Scripture. He's the ultimate author of the entire Bible. So all of it goes. All of it is to be carefully observed in the life of a disciple.

- ❖ So let me ask: *If you're a disciple, then what intentional things are you doing right now to both learn and observe all that Jesus' taught and commanded? And what intentional things are you doing right now to teach others to do the same?*

- ❖ This is what discipleship is all about: **Being intentional, in relationship with others, centered around the Bible, striving to learn and observe all that Christ has commanded.** That could take the form of life-on-life discipleship which I believe is most effective. But this should be happening in families, in small groups, in fellowships, among friends.
 - ▶ Now if there's no intentional discipleship happening in your life right now, there's no better day to start than today. Identify one or two other believers in your life right now. It doesn't matter if they're young or older.
 - Take initiative and ask, "*Hey would you be interested in meeting up with some frequency just to read a book of the Bible together. No hardcore inductive study. No hours of prep. Just meet to read and to discuss our questions and reactions to the text. And then we can regularly pray for each other to observe what Jesus is teaching us.*" That's it. Discipleship can be that straightforward.

Imitation of Christ

- ❖ But there's one more element I need to mention and that's imitation. **At the heart of discipleship is imitation.** When you're discipling someone, you're not just trying to impart your teaching. You're trying to impart your life – a certain way of life (cf. 2 Tim. 3:10-11).
 - ▶ This was Paul's approach in discipling Timothy. He set an example for Timothy of what it looks like to faithfully follow Christ. Paul was not shy to call others to imitate him. Phil. 3:17 – "*Brothers, join in imitating me*". 1 Cor. 4:16 – "*I urge you, then, be imitators of me*". 1 Cor. 11:1 – "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*"
- ❖ Now there's the key. Imitate me as I imitate Christ. **That's why Paul has no issue with telling people to imitate him because the standard of imitation is not his life and doctrine but Jesus' life and doctrine.** But even so, I get the sense that many Christians feel either inadequate or uncomfortable to tell others to imitate them. They don't feel qualified.
 - ▶ **But you don't have to be perfect before you can model the Perfect One to others.** As long as you're imitating Christ, be it imperfectly, you can call others to imitate you. In 1 Timothy chapter 4, after instructing Timothy to set an example for other believers in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, Paul goes on to say, "*practice these things . . . so that all may see your progress.*" (1 Tim. 4:15) Your progress.
- ❖ He's saying: **Go and disciple others by setting an example of progress not perfection.** So I take that to mean I'm free to say: Imitate me. Imitate how I study my Bible, how I pray to God, how I serve the church, how I love my neighbors, how I treat my wife and daughter. But also imitate how I grieve my sin, how I repent of my selfishness, how I apologize to my wife for my rudeness. That's not perfection but that *is* progress.
 - ▶ **I think we might have too high of a standard for who is ready to disciple others.** There have been times I've asked people in the career fellowship to help me think of people who could possibly disciple some of our college students. And I draw blanks.

- ❖ *Why is that? Why is it that we only consider asking those who are leadership-material to disciple? What does that subtly suggest? That discipleship is a specialty reserved for the spiritually mature. But we've already seen the fallacy in that line of thinking.*
 - ▶ I'm convinced that any Christian who's sensitive to his or her sinfulness, who makes a daily practice of repentance, who's progressing in his or her own discipleship to Christ – be it ever so slowly – is qualified to disciple someone else. You can say to someone, *"Imitate me as I imitate Christ"*.

The Promise to Sustain the Great Commission

- ❖ I really hope that encourages more and more of you to be more active in discipleship. But let me conclude with the strongest of encouragements. It's found in the form of a promise from the lips of our Lord. **It's the promise that's going to sustain our mission as a church.**
 - ▶ Look at the end of v20. Jesus doesn't want his final words to his disciples to be a command. He wants it to be a promise. So he says, *"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*
- ❖ He's already given us his power, his authority, in v18. **But what Jesus offers us here is even sweeter. He promises us his very presence.** And what I love about this promise is its constancy and longevity.
 - ▶ Jesus says he is with us always. Literally he says, *"Behold I am with you the whole of every day."* He never takes any breaks. **There will never be a moment that he ceases to be near his disciples.** In good times and in bad. In joy and in pain. In blessing and in suffering. He's constant, steady, always there working in all things for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).
 - And this consistency on Jesus' part will last to the end of the age. Till his kingdom come. Do you see how great this promise is? It comes with constancy *and* longevity. Never will our Lord leave us or forsake us.
- ❖ So as he sends you out on mission to make God-loving, compassionate disciples among all nations with all of the costs involved, with all the accompanying risks and dangers – be sure that he's with you always and forever.
 - ▶ I find it amazing how Matthew's Gospel began by introducing us to Jesus as Emmanuel *"God with us"* (Mt. 1:21). And now it concludes in the same way. God is with us. The Son of God is with his disciples to the end of the age.