

We Exist to Make Disciples

Matthew 28:16-20

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 15, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're stepping out of our series on faith and vocation, and we're going to step back to take a broader look at our church's mission. A number of you are new or newer to our church. So I think this will be helpful to introduce you to Houston Chinese Church. But even long-time members need a good reminder of our mission here – remembering why we exist.
 - So hopefully you've heard us say before that: ***HCC exists to make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations.*** That's our official mission statement. What are we here for? We're here to make disciples – to make followers of Jesus Christ. That's why we exist.

- ❖ Now our mission statement, as you might have noticed, is an amalgamation of Jesus's Great Commandment – to love God and love your neighbor (Mt 22:37-39) – and Jesus's Great Commission. Found in this morning's text. Listen to v19, "*Go therefore and make disciples.*" That's a direct command from Jesus himself. Go and make disciples of me. **Christian, this is why you're still here on earth.** This is why God didn't bring you home to his kingdom the very minute you were converted. This is what you and I – who are in Christ and still in the flesh – what we're called on earth to do. To make disciples.

- ❖ Now for those who have been in the church for a while, this idea of making disciples – discipling someone – gets thrown around. To the point that – while it's a familiar phrase – many of us might be vague on its exact meaning. So, right up front, let me help clarify.
 - **On one hand, to make disciples means to evangelize.** To share the gospel. To help lead someone to Christ. Now let's be clear – we are powerless to *make* anybody a Christian. Conversion is totally God's prerogative. So when we speak of making disciples – and direct that specifically towards non-believers – **what you should have in view is the intentional effort to proclaim to them the good news of *who* Jesus is and *what* he's done to redeem us and reconcile us to God.** Share that news with them with the hope they'll become followers of Jesus. Disciples in their own right. So to make disciples means to evangelize non-believers.
 - **But it also means to edify believers.** To build up Christians in the faith. To help them grow. So here's a way to say it that tries to capture both emphases. **We exist to *make and mature* disciples.** We're all about making new disciples (evangelizing them) *and* maturing existing disciples (edifying them).

- ❖ Now later on, we'll talk, in more detail, about the *how* – how we go about making and maturing disciples. But, broadly speaking, we would say that both efforts are aimed at *intentionally* doing spiritual good to another in a *highly relational* context. **Disciple-making is aimed at intentionally doing spiritual good to another in a highly relational context.**
 - *Intentional* and *relational* are the key words. I'm sure you've had the occasional experience of an encouraging, unplanned conversation with another Christian that strengthened your faith. A spontaneous encounter that God used for your spiritual good. That's a real blessing. But that's *not* what we mean at HCC by disciple-making. **We have in mind an *intentional* effort to encourage and edify another.**

- ❖ And what I'm doing here in the pulpit is certainly intentional and essential to your spiritual formation, your discipleship. But preaching from a pulpit or teaching in a classroom is *not* what we have in mind when we speak of the activity of disciple-making. We're describing something more relational. Typically occurring one-on-one or in a very small group.
- ❖ **But, right up front, I want to get us on the same page when we say our mission is to *make disciples*.** Now, a few years ago, we developed a vision statement that's supposed to describe what our church will look like if we faithfully pursued our disciple-making mission. What do we *en-vision* HCC to look like, in the years to come, as we live out our mission?
 - We said we envision ourselves to be – *an urban Chinese heritage church in central Houston that reaches all those in our lives, Chinese or otherwise, through equipping, sending, and planting*. **Our mission statement speaks of what we *do* as a church. Our vision statement expresses what we hope to *be* as a church.**
- ❖ Now you might've picked up on the emphasis of being an urban church in central Houston. Which has to do with our location. We've been here since 1982. **We're the only established Chinese heritage church in and around the 610 Loop that has a full-blown English congregation.** All the rest are further out in the suburbs. We're the only urban one in central Houston – in close proximity to key institutions like the Texas Medical Center, Rice University, University of Houston, and the downtown core. Those are the institutions that drew most of you here to Houston. The same could be said of our Chinese congregations.
 - So as we were approaching our church's 50th anniversary, church leaders were trying to envision what we'd would look like in the next 50 years, Lord-willing. **And we came to the conviction that we need to invest more in this strategic location and plant deeper roots in this community.** And that eventually resulted in a decision, last year, to purchase ten acres next door, which included an office building. That doubled our acreage and nearly tripled the square footage of usable ministry space.
- ❖ **Now this month, we're starting the design phase of this project.** We're working with a design firm to flesh out the three-phased master plan that's been guiding us. So this morning in the lobby, you'll have a chance to learn more about the renovation project and how you can get involved. **And the pastors thought it would be timely to coordinate our messages today.** So that we're all preaching from the same text. We're all emphasizing our disciple-making mission. And we're all connecting the dots between that ongoing mission and this unique, once-in-a-generation building project.
- ❖ So my plan this morning is to walk us through this Great Commission text. We'll talk about our disciple-making mission. **But I'm also going to make application to our building project and how new facilities will help facilitate new disciple-making opportunities down the road.** Now out of this text, I want to show you three things – the power, the plan, and the promise. In vv16-18, Jesus reveals **the power** to fuel the Great Commission. In vv19-20, he gives us **the plan** to fulfill the Great Commission. And at the end of v20, he leaves us with **the promise** that's going to sustain the Great Commission.

The Power to Fuel the Great Commission

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the power to fuel the Great Commission – and by extension what fuels the mission of our church. And that would be the authority of the Risen Lord. **The sovereign authority of Christ Jesus the Lord is backing our mission to make disciples among all nations.** We see this in vv16-18. Before we read it again, let me set the context.
 - The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of how 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. In chapter 27, he just died the death every one of us deserves to die because of the 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.
 - But in the beginning of chapter 28, we read the good news of how God raised 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 region where he centered his earthly ministry.

- ❖ So let's pick up the story in v16, *“¹⁶Now 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?** Did some of the eleven disciples doubt? Even as they're staring at the Resurrected Lord?
 - Most commentators I read think the “some” refer to other believers who happened to be there in addition to 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 how the Resurrection was not something his followers were anticipating. Clearly, it was still difficult for some to process. **And it goes to show how the human heart can be so hardened 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 needed was the Holy Spirit. They needed Pentecost to happen. They needed the Spirit to fall upon them and give them 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 only become Christians if the Holy Spirit falls upon them and gives them the new birth. New hearts filled with genuine faith. Faith that overcomes their hesitations.

- ❖ 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.”* Now this word *authority* that he uses is interesting. It's the Greek word *exousia*. **To have *exousia* means you have power to do as you please by virtue of having the right to do as you please.** It's distinct from a related word, *dunamis*, which is usually translated as power. But used in reference to those who possess physical strength or might. But *exousia*, on the other hand, is not limited to physical strength. Meaning there are some people who are strong and powerful but lacking in *exousia*. And there are those who appear powerless to the naked eye but actually possess great *exousia*.

- ❖ Let me offer an illustration I heard that I found helpful. **Picture a football field.** On this field are 22 men with great *dunamis*. They exude great power and strength. Everyone can see that. **But they're not the most powerful people on the field. That designation belongs to seven persons dressed in black and white.** Yes, they're usually older and smaller in stature compared to those 22 men. They might lack *dunamis*. They're not as strong. But they're more powerful because they have *exousia*. They have authority.
- ❖ **Friends, the good news for us is that – Jesus not only has *dunamis* – he's been given *exousia*.** All *exousia* in heaven and on earth. Jesus has the divine right to rule over heaven and earth – over all peoples, nations, and languages. **Which means you'll 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.
 - **So when he sends you out to go and make disciples, Jesus is sending you with his own authority.** You carry with you a delegated authority. Which makes all the difference. Let's face it, most of the time, we feel lacking in *dunamis*. We feel weak and powerless. And yet, if we have the Spirit of Christ in us, we have *exousia*. We have Jesus's absolute authority backing our mission.
- ❖ **So whatever fears, whatever obstacles, whatever hesitation might be hindering you from faithfully pursuing our disciple-making mission – just know that Jesus is stronger.** Jesus has all authority. So you have nothing to worry about. He has it under control. You just be faithful to the mission of making disciples.
 - **Now, when it comes to our building project, there's an understandable degree of fear and hesitation that we're all feeling.** The estimated costs are high. Renovating that office building to make it usable for gospel-centered, disciple-making ministry is going to ask for all of us to dig deep and give sacrificially. We feel powerless.
 - **But then we remember that the power was never meant to come from us. The power and authority fueling the our mission to make disciples was always going to come from Christ.** So we just have to keep Christ at the center of this building project and make sure we're doing this – not to make ourselves a kingdom – but to make more disciples for our King.

The Plan to Fulfill the Great Commission

- ❖ So we considered the power fueling the Great Commission. But now let's look carefully at the actual plan – Jesus's 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 nations. **His universal authority compels us on a universal mission to make disciples among all kinds of peoples.**

- ❖ **This is why, in that vision statement we developed, we're aiming to make disciples of all those whom God puts in our lives – Chinese or otherwise.** As a Chinese heritage church, we're blessed to have Chinese congregations that are focused on reaching the unsaved and unchurched among the Chinese diaspora in central Houston. But our congregation has the opportunity to expand HCC's reach to all nations. To all the different groups of peoples.
 - **That's why most of the new ministries we're envisioning for that new building are aimed at connecting us with the diverse community around us.** An indoor playground to bless families. A gym and athletic field to connect our people with others who enjoy basketball, volleyball, pickleball, flag football, etc. A loading dock with storage that could be used for a food distribution ministry to serve needy families around us. And more space to hold conferences, concerts, and events open to the community. **The common denominator in all these ideas is to relationally connect us with unsaved and unchurched individuals and families in our diverse community** – with the hope of making more disciples of Jesus among all nations.

- ❖ **Now, as we said earlier, disciple-making 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 lost people to repent and believe in Jesus. And as we said, it's the Holy Spirit's job to give them that new heart of faith and repentance. That's how a disciple is made. **And then a disciple is matured in three ways:** (a) Identification with Christ, (b) Instruction under Christ, and the (c) Imitation of Christ.

- ❖ **First, we need to help disciples of Jesus to identify with him in the waters of baptism.** In v19, we're commanded to baptize disciples in the name of our Triune God. Notice it says *name* and not the *names* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Which is a subtle hint that we worship one God with one Name who eternally exists as three Persons – a Trinity.
 - And it literally says to baptize disciples *into* the name of our Triune God. Into a relationship with God. **And the only reason you're in that relationship is because you identify with Christ, especially in his death and resurrection.** And that's what baptism symbolizes. As you go under the waters, you're identifying with Christ in his death. As you're raised up, you're identifying with his resurrection (cf. Rom 6:3-4).

- ❖ **Baptism is a public sign of your entrance into the inner life of the Triune God and into his covenant community, the Church.** So it is a ritual, a ceremony. But that doesn't make it a mere formality. Don't treat it as merely optional. Just as you probably wouldn't treat your own wedding ceremony as a mere formality – in the same way, your baptism is imbued with great meaning and significance, especially in the eyes of God.
 - **So if any of you consider yourself a follower of Jesus – but you have yet to follow him through the waters of baptism – then don't overlook the first step of discipleship.** Jesus was baptized. And he commands his disciples to be baptized. To go public with your faith. To publicly identify with him. So if you realize now that you've skipped the first step – if you want to get baptized – please reach out. We would love to help you take that step.

- ❖ And perhaps, for some of you, you were already baptized in the past by another gospel-preaching church, but you don't worship there anymore. You're here – with us! **So if the initial step of your discipleship to Christ is to publicly identify with him and his church – then I encourage you to officially join our church – if you haven't done so already.** To publicly identify with us. Again, reach out if you're interested in church membership.
- ❖ **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* his instructions and not just comprehending them. Most of us have no trouble learning – and even accepting all that Jesus commanded – but *observing* all he commanded? Obeying it all? That's a 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. Christ is the ultimate author of the entire Bible. So all of it goes. Old and New Testament. All of it is to be carefully observed by his disciples.
- ❖ So let me ask: If you're a disciple of Jesus, then what intentional things are you doing to both learn and observe all that he taught and commanded? And what intentional things are you doing to teach others to do the same?
 - This is what discipleship is all about: **Being intentional, in a highly relational context, helping each other to learn and observe all that Christ has commanded.** That could take the form of one-on-one mentoring with an older and younger believer. But don't limit yourself to one way of doing it. Parents should be discipling their own kids. Peers can disciple each other. There's flexibility here.
- ❖ The important thing is that it's intentional and relational. **So if that's not happening in your life, then there's no better day to start than today.** Identify someone in your community group or in this congregation. And take the initiative to ask, "*Hey, would you be interested in meeting up to read a book of the Bible together or to read this good Christian book.*"
 - No inductive study needed. No hours of prep. You can even wait to read a chapter of that book *together* as you meet. And simply discuss your questions and reactions to the text. And then pray for each other to observe whatever Jesus is teaching you. That's it. And when you finish the book, that's a clear horizon – an end point. But, of course, if you mutually want to continue, go right ahead and choose another book. That's what intentional disciple-making can look like.
- ❖ But there's one more element to mention. **At the heart of disciple-making is imitation.** 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 Jesus. 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 had no issue with telling people to imitate him because the standard of imitation is not his life and doctrine but Jesus's life and doctrine.** But even so, I realize many believers feel either inadequate or uncomfortable in telling 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 doing your best to imitate Christ, albeit imperfectly, you can call others to imitate you. In 1 Timothy 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.*" (4:15) Your *progress*.
- ❖ In other words, he's saying: **Go and make disciples by setting an example of progress – not perfection.** Feel free to say to others: Imitate me. Imitate how I study my Bible; how I pray to God; how I serve the church; how I love my neighbors as myself; how I love my spouse and parent my kids. But also imitate how I grieve over my sin; how I repent of my selfishness; how I own up to my mistakes.
 - **You don't have to be perfect to point others to the Perfect One.** You just need to be a follower of Jesus who is progressing in his or her own discipleship to Christ – be it ever so slowly or bumpy. As long as you're progressing, by his grace, you can say to another, "*Imitate me as I imitate Christ.*"

The Promise to Sustain the Great Commission

- ❖ I hope that encourages more of you to be more active in disciple-making. But let me conclude with the strongest of encouragements. It's found in the form of a promise found on 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. Listen to what he says, "*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"
- ❖ He's already given us his authority in v18. **But what Jesus offers us here is even sweeter. He promises us his presence.** And what I love about this promise is its consistency and longevity. Jesus says he is with us *always*. Literally, it says, "*Behold I am with you the whole of every day.*" That means 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's part will last to the end of the age.** Till his kingdom come. Do you see how great this promise is? It comes with consistency and longevity. Never will our Lord leave us nor forsake us.
 - I find it encouraging to read through Matthew's Gospel and to be introduced, in the first chapter, to Jesus as **Emmanuel**, as "**God with us.**" (1:21) And now, in the last chapter, the Gospel concludes in the same way. God is with us. The Son of God is with his disciples always, to the end of the age.

- ❖ **Friends, we've got a big project ahead of us. Let's just remember *not* to get out ahead of Jesus.** But to make sure that whatever we do, we're doing it with Christ. Better yet, we want him to go before us. And, as disciples, we'll follow in his steps.
 - **And I appreciate how his mention of "*the end of the age*" really helps to keep everything in perspective.** From the perspective of eternity. In the end, whatever we build next door will one day age and rust and decay.

- ❖ **We must never treat a building as necessary to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. But, at the same time, it's fair to say that buildings can be extremely helpful.** They can support and facilitate our disciple-making mission. They can provide a central and dedicated space for the assembly of God's people under the proclamation of God's Word. They provide space for the ministry of the Word in all sorts of formats and occasions.
 - And a building can help a church establish a stable, long-term gospel presence within a community. Enabling an incarnational witness. **Where we imitate our Lord – who promises to be with us – by likewise promising our community to be with them.** So that we're not just a church that happens to be in this community. But rather, a church that is *for* this community.
 - So in the weeks and months to come, let's keep our church's disciple-making mission on the front burner. **Never losing sight – as we seek to build a building – that we ultimately exist to build up the body of Christ.** To make disciples, in his name, among all nations.