

Matthew 28:16-20

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[0 : 00] Today, we are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. But how do we celebrate? What form does that celebration take?

Well, we can declare that He is risen. He is risen indeed, and it is good to do so, to verbally make that declaration. We can sing hymns and portions of Scripture that speak of the risen Jesus, indeed sing hymns directed to the risen Jesus.

And it is good to do that also. But we must also celebrate the resurrection of Jesus by listening to and obeying the words and commands of the risen Jesus.

And that's what I want us to spend some time doing this evening, listening to the resurrected risen Jesus as He speaks to His disciples, and as He speaks to them, by extension, speaks also to us.

Now, in Matthew chapter 28, this morning we read the whole of the chapter, this evening we limited ourselves to the final four or five verses. In that chapter, Matthew follows his account of the resurrection of Jesus with his record of the Great Commission.

[1 : 18] In fact, we can't really speak of the account of the Great Commission following the account of the resurrection. Rather, the account of the Great Commission forms part of Matthew's account of the resurrection.

He sees it as part of one and the same account. Jesus rising from the grave, and as He rises from the grave, so He addresses His disciples with what their task is to be in the age that has arisen and emerged with His resurrection.

And the arrangement that Matthew has and uses is clearly deliberate. There is that deliberate intention of connecting these two events, the resurrection and the Great Commission.

Matthew would have us listen and obey the words, the commission of the risen Jesus, who rose again to continue His mission and to do so in significant measure through His disciples, through you and me.

What we're going to do is simply briefly set the scene of what happened or when it happened and where it happened as we're provided that information in the passage.

[2 : 40] So set the scene and then move on to consider the commission itself. And we'll look at three aspects of the commission. And in a moment, I'll note or mention what those three aspects are.

But first of all, let's set the scene by commenting on the manner in which Matthew introduces the occasion there from verse 16. Really, verse 16 and 17, he kind of sets the scene for Jesus' words that He directs to the disciples.

What can we just notice as we notice these couple of verses? Well, verse 16 begins, then the eleven disciples went to Galilee. Now, that first word, then, there are different ways in which it can be translated.

Some versions translate it now. One way is translating it with the word but, where the intention seems to be to contrast the eleven disciples with those who have been mentioned before, who are the guards.

The guards went into the city, but the eleven, they went to Galilee. They're both following orders, effectively. The guards are following the orders of their superiors, very sadly, following those foolish orders.

[3 : 53] But the eleven, they are heading to Galilee, following the orders and instructions of Jesus. And even in that contrast that is maybe very subtly drawn, there's a challenge to us.

Whose orders do we follow? Whose orders do you follow? Do you go with the flow, with what's expected of you, what is deemed to be the easier route, or do you follow the instructions?

Do you go where Jesus commands you to go? So the disciples went to Galilee. They'd been instructed to go to Galilee, and they go to Galilee.

Perhaps somewhat poignantly, Matthew is explicit in speaking of the eleven disciples. Of course, we know that there were twelve disciples, but one, sadly, had betrayed Jesus and had met with his own death.

And so only eleven remain. And they go to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. We're not given any more precise geographic reference. Some were in Galilee, clearly a meeting point that was familiar to both the disciples and Jesus, and they were clear as to where it was that Jesus would be meeting them there in Galilee.

[5 : 06] The idea, or the picture of Jesus on a mountaintop, giving these instructions, this great commission to his disciples, I think is also significant, without wanting to read too much into these details.

But the mountaintop almost serves as a kind of throne for the risen Jesus. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is in different ways portrayed as a kind of enthronement as Jesus is raised from the dead to take his place as the king of kings, to be granted the authority that he will go on to speak to of in a moment.

So here he is on this natural throne, on a mountaintop, surrounded by his disciples. And then we're told that he approaches the disciples, and we read in verse 17 that when they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.

And much has been said, or much has been speculated about who are being spoken of here. Matthew is very precise in identifying those involved as being the 11 disciples.

Some have suggested that he might not, he isn't excluding the possibility that there were others as well as the 11 disciples. But it seems to me the most natural way of understanding what Matthew is saying is that on this occasion it was just the 11 disciples who were present.

[6 : 33] And yet among those disciples, those who knew him best, who would presumably have been most able to recognize him, yet among them we're not told who they were, perhaps wisely.

A veil is drawn over their identity. But among those 11, there were some who recognized him and worshipped him, but some doubted. Now I don't think we should unfairly read too much into this language of some doubting.

This isn't a description of settled unbelief, but rather has the sense of hesitating in reaching a conclusion, perhaps even as to the identity of the one who is approaching them.

The living Bible, which is really more of a paraphrase rather than a translation, but sometimes in the form in which it paraphrases parts of Scripture, captures the sense.

And I think on this occasion it captures the sense of what is being said on this occasion. And it's along these lines. Some of them weren't sure it really was Jesus. Once they were sure, I have no doubt that they joined with the others in worshipping him.

[7 : 45] But for a moment, and maybe just a fleeting moment, there was this doubt, there was this hesitation on the part of some. Well, that's really just setting the scene. But let's move on to the commission itself.

And I want us to consider three aspects of the great commission that are fairly clearly identifiable in these two or three verses.

First of all, we're going to think about the grounds of it, the grounds upon which Jesus delivers this commission to his disciples. So first of all, the grounds of it. But then we'll spend a little time thinking about the content of it.

What is it that he commissions his disciples to do? And then thirdly, really just following the order of Jesus' words, the promise that accompanies it.

So these three aspects of what is generally known as the great commission. The grounds of it, the content of it, and the promise that accompanies it.

[8 : 47] First of all then, the grounds of it. And the grounds of this great commission very clearly are, or is, the authority of Jesus. Jesus is acting as a king, exercising the authority he enjoys to instruct the citizens of his kingdom, but his authority extends beyond his citizens to the nations of the world that he is sending them to.

And as we notice in the very language employed, we can identify different aspects of Jesus' authority. So the grounds of the commission is the authority of Jesus.

But let's just notice some aspects of that authority. First of all, Jesus describes his authority as given. Notice there in verse 18, Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

This authority that he enjoys, that he now exercises, Jesus himself describes as being given. And it's implicit that it is God the Father who has given, or grants, this authority to his Son.

Now the actual words that Jesus employs here do seem to be drawn from, we maybe can't state this categorically, but they do seem to be drawn from that passage in Daniel chapter 7 that we read earlier in the service.

[10 : 11] In Daniel chapter 7 in verse 14 where there is this looking forward to this messianic king. And what is said of this messianic king? He was given, notice the same verb employed, he was given authority, glory, and sovereign power.

All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. So you can see the echoes of that in the language that Jesus employs. Authority being given to him and authority that he will exercise to send his disciples into the nations of the world that they might join in the worship of the king.

And so this is a given authority and the implication is that the prophecy of Daniel there, Daniel chapter 7, is being fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

The tense of the verb where Jesus speaks of all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. The tense of the verb indicates a particular point in time when this authority was given.

And the obvious point in time that we can identify is the resurrection. At the resurrection, the father grants the son kingly authority.

[11 : 27] And again, we hear and can notice echoes of that in Paul's letter to the Philippians in chapter 2 and verses 9 to 11.

Let me just read those words that are, I think, very familiar to many of us where, again, this idea of at the resurrection Jesus being granted this place of kingly authority.

Philippians chapter 2 and verse 9. So, Paul has already been speaking about Jesus as the one who had humbled himself, had become a man, had died on the cross, and then we read, therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him, that is, gave Jesus the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, is king, is sovereign to the glory of God the Father.

So, there is this sense in which Jesus having accomplished the mission that he had been given, the very fact of that accomplishment is acknowledged by the Father as he is vindicated by the resurrection and as he ascends to occupy the throne that belongs to him.

Now, when we speak of authority being given to Jesus at this point, that's not to suggest that prior to the resurrection, Jesus was devoid of authority.

[13 : 00] Clearly, he did enjoy great authority. He had the authority to heal, to resurrect, to forgive sin, and we could go on. But prior to his resurrection, in his state of humiliation, to use the language that is often employed, there was, on the part of Jesus, a voluntary renunciation of the exercise of some of his divine prerogatives, of the exercise of his divine authority, but no longer.

With the resurrection, he is acknowledged by the Father as the ruler of the kings of the earth, as the one worthy of the worship and obedience of all.

So this authority, which is the grounds upon which Jesus delivers the commission, is a given authority, but it's also, as we can see, an absolute authority.

Jesus says, all authority in heaven and on earth. It's absolute in its character and it's absolute in its scope. All authority in heaven and on earth.

So there is nowhere in the created universe where Jesus does not exercise his absolute authority as king of kings.

[14 : 14] Jesus is, in the language of Revelation that we were noticing a few weeks ago. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is seated on his throne and his authority is absolute in both its character and its scope.

Some of you may be familiar with the quote. It's an oft-repeated quote by Abraham Kuyper, who was the prime minister of the Netherlands at the beginning of the 20th century.

He famously, in one of his lectures, I think it was at the, if I'm not mistaken, it was at the opening lecture at the founding of the Free University in Amsterdam. He included in his lecture these words, there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine.

And that is true. And why is it true? Because, as Jesus himself says, in his own words, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

If it were not true, it would be the most outrageous statement that anybody could possibly make. So it's given authority, it's absolute authority, but also, and this leads us on to the next part, really, it is exercised authority.

[15 : 35] In verse 19, the verse begins with, therefore. Clearly there's a connection there between what has gone before. Jesus is saying that on the basis of this authority, I now exercise it in giving you, my disciples, this commission.

And so it's not just some theoretical authority that he enjoys, but it is authority that he exercises. And that leads us on to the content of the commission.

What is the commission that he gives to his disciples? Well, there we have it in verse 19. Therefore, go and make disciples. Go and make disciples. The go is an imperative.

It's a command. And that, again, of course, is a function of his authority. As the one who enjoys all authority, it is entirely within his rights and prerogative to command his disciples to go.

They are to go. This is a command that they are given. It's sometimes been rather maybe ironically suggested that the church has taken the great commission and has converted it into the great suggestion that we can maybe ponder on or think about and decide whether this is something we're able to do or wish to do or in a position to do or maybe we'll postpone doing.

[16 : 50] But it's not, of course, a great suggestion. It is the great commission. It is dynamic and demanding. We can't stay still. We need to get a move on. We are to go. It's showing my age, but I think it was in the 80s there was a gospel singer.

I think he went by the name of Michael Green. And he has a song that had as its kind of core lyric, Did Jesus command you to stay? And obviously, it's a kind of provocative way of making us consider this commission to go.

Did Jesus command you to stay? And of course, he didn't. He didn't command any of you to stay. He commanded all of us to go. To go and make disciples. We are to make disciples.

We're not called to make converts, to secure decisions for Christ, but to make disciples. And a disciple, as we know, is a learner and a follower.

Now, the reality, of course, is that the very ones called to make disciples are themselves disciples in the making. And so there's this dynamic of those who are making disciples themselves still growing in discipleship, still becoming disciples.

[18 : 01] There's still much to learn in what it means to be a disciple. And in a moment, we'll say a little bit more about how Jesus understands discipleship. But before we move on to that, just notice the final thing of the commission.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations. The authority of Jesus extends beyond his disciples. It's not just that, well, he has his disciples and he can command them.

He has the authority to tell them to go. It's clear that the authority of Jesus isn't just to command his disciples. The authority extends to the nations that he is sending them to.

And that is to give them confidence. It's not just that the disciples say, well, Jesus is our king and he's telling us to go, so we'll have to go. But we know that where we're going, there's very little hope of success because, well, what could we possibly achieve in the nations of the world?

No, Jesus is saying, my authority has been exercised in sending you, but be assured that where you go, I also enjoy and exercise my authority.

[19 : 04] And that's what guarantees the success of your mission. His purpose, and a purpose that is being fulfilled, is to draw a people, one people, but one people from every nation of the world.

Now, what does making disciples involve? Now, in the passage, there are two participles, to throw in some grammar, there are two participles, baptizing and teaching.

Now, why is it significant to identify these two verbs as participles? Well, because that means that they're subservient to the main verb, the main task, that is, to making disciples.

Jesus is not giving his disciples three tasks. He's not saying, you have to make disciples, you have to baptize, and you have to teach. There are not three things they need to do.

There's one thing they need to do. The one thing they need to do is make disciples. Now, making disciples will involve baptizing and teaching. That's how you make disciples, baptizing and teaching.

[20 : 15] So that's important to understand, and the very grammar kind of points us in that direction. One task, make disciples. And what does that involve? Well, it involves baptizing, and it involves teaching.

I suppose if you think of those two elements, we could see them as initiation and continuation. Baptizing speaks of the beginning of the life of discipleship, and teaching is what follows throughout the life of discipleship.

But let's think of both of them in the measure that we are given information about them here in the passage. First of all, baptizing. Baptism is a sacrament of initiation and identification that accompanies repentance and faith.

We think of Peter in this sermon there at Pentecost. What was it that he called the people to do? Repent and believe and be baptized. Baptism, a visible manner in which those who had believed and repented could identify with the family that they were becoming part of.

For an adult, baptism marks the formal beginning of a life of discipleship. Those who believe are baptized. And when we think about what Jesus says about baptism, we have more.

[21 : 35] There's this rather significant and intriguing Trinitarian formula that Jesus establishes, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And perhaps of most particular significance is the manner in which Jesus takes his place. You know, in his own words, he takes his place alongside the Father and the Spirit as the object of the disciples' commitment in a way that he perhaps had never done, at least in this manner before.

He's the one who is saying, I stand alongside the Father and the Spirit. When you baptize, you're up to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It's often been noted and I think helpfully that what Jesus instructs his disciples to do is to baptize in the name, singular, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Not in the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but in the name. And there we see in seed form, I suppose, a core truth concerning the Trinity.

[22 : 51] Three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but one name. Those who repent and believe are to be baptized in or into the name.

And this also speaks of an act of commitment or even of union, a deep connection with God. So baptizing. But the other element of making disciples, the one that occupies much more time is teaching.

Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 20, and teaching them. Baptism is only the beginning. Those baptized need to be taught.

They need to be fashioned into disciples of Jesus. And what are we to teach? What are disciples to be taught? Is it content or is it conduct?

Now you might say, well, we don't need to choose between the two. And it's true, we don't choose between the two, but there's no doubt that of the two, one has priority. Because notice what Jesus says, and it's really quite striking.

[23 : 56] We're so familiar with the language, we can maybe not notice how striking it is. He says, teaching them to obey everything. You know, Jesus could have said, teaching them all my commandments.

And that would have focused on content. You know, there's so many commandments I've given you, so much teaching I've given you. Of course, Jesus had given his seal of approval to all of the scriptures, so that could all come under this category.

And Jesus could have said, if you're going to have solid disciples, they need to have sound doctrine taught to them. They need to know the Ten Commandments. They need to know all the fundamental doctrines of the faith.

And that's what you need to do. But he doesn't say that. Not that that isn't important, but that's not what he says. He says, teaching them to obey everything. The measure of the teaching will be the measure in which those who are being taught obey.

The measure in which they serve. The measure in which they go and make disciples themselves. It's not about sitting a test at the end of the course. You know, and you sit a test and you see if you learned everything well and you get a good mark.

[25 : 03] I'm a good disciple now because I got a good mark in my discipleship exam. No, it's not about content. Principally, it is about conduct. It is about lifestyle.

It is about how we live and very particularly the measure in which we obey. Now, use that measure as a means of self-examination for yourself this evening, for all of us.

If in the course of this week you fail to obey Jesus, then, to be honest, it doesn't matter if you're, you know, soundly grounded in the five points of Calvinism or if you know your catechism off by heart.

If you go out into the world and you disobey Jesus, then it really doesn't count for much, all that you know. It doesn't count for much that this congregation can be identified as a sound congregation with good theology.

I'm not saying that's true, but even if it were true, and let's hope it is true, I think it is true, but of what value is that if we who belong to it go out and live our lives in disobedience.

[26 : 08] And he, very particularly, to this command, to go and to make disciples. You see, the teaching has as its core purpose and intention that those who are taught obey, teaching them to obey.

Now, what are they to obey? What are we to obey? Well, everything. Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. It's not for us to pick and choose what we obey.

You know, that seems to be the way things are today. Maybe it's ever been so. That we pick and choose. Well, yeah, I can obey this part of the Bible, but I'm not so sure about this part. This part isn't very convenient.

It's very old-fashioned. It's not really very popular, so we can just leave that part to one side. No, that's not what Jesus says. Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

How do you teach obedience? You know, if you have a curriculum on Christian doctrine, you can work out how you're going to teach it. Well, we can do it over, you know, we can maybe do it over ten weeks and we'll cover these different subject matters and at the end of it we'll cover the ground.

[27 : 17] Maybe we could do a course on the shorter catechism or the confession of faith and you could work out how to do that. You know, you could employ all kinds of maybe very helpful and creative teaching techniques to ensure that the content is delivered and understood by the students and that would be good.

But how do you teach obedience? What do you think? How do you teach obedience? How, if you're a parent, how do you teach obedience to your children? Surely the principal way in which you teach obedience is by modeling obedience.

That's the only way you can really teach obedience is by being obedient. You see, if you're not obedient yourself then all your words mean nothing. And so when Jesus says to his disciples you have to teach them to obey, it's implicit that the only way they're going to be effective in doing that is being obedient themselves.

You see, if we think of children but not just children but especially children, if there's one thing that they see through in an instant, it's hypocrisy. You know, a parent or a teacher or somebody who has authority over them telling them to do this, urging them to obey when the one doing the urging is themselves or are themselves disobeying.

So the way in which we teach obedience is by being obedient, by modeling obedience. I think another element and these are very much intertwined is that obedience is taught by inspiring obedience, by presenting to those being taught the delight of obedience, the rewards of obedience, the worthiness of God to be obeyed.

[28 : 52] You know, as we present to those who are being made disciples how great God is, how beautiful Jesus is, how wonderful the sacrifice is that He has made for us, we inspire obedience.

It's not simply a case of, well, these are the duties to be performed and if I'm going to be a good disciple, I've just got to do it and it's going to be tough and I don't really want to do it but I'll do my best. No, I think the way in which we teach obedience is modeling it but also inspiring it, motivating it as we point others and each other to the worthiness of God and the beauty of God and His worthiness to be obeyed and serve.

That's the continent then of the commission. Then more briefly, just let's notice the promise that accompanies it. We have that at the end of verse 20. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

I am with you. Now this promise quite fittingly serves as an echo of what Matthew records for us at the very beginning of his gospel.

You'll recall in chapter 1 of Matthew's gospel the account of the birth of Jesus, we're told of a name that Jesus is to be called. In Matthew 1, 23, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[30 : 22] So at the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew focuses in on Jesus as the one by whom God is with us. And as he comes to the close of his gospel, he comes back to this glorious truth as he records the promise of Jesus to be with us.

I am with you. I am with you. This is the promise that accompanies the commission. Notice elements of the promise. First of all, notice its trustworthiness.

Well, the one who makes it guarantees that it is a trustworthy promise. But also, the very language that Jesus employs, and surely I am with you always. It's as if Jesus is searching for the very words that will guarantee or assure maybe a somewhat doubting audience that this is true, that this is a promise that they can trust.

Surely, I am with you always. Not even looking forward into the future tense. I will be with you. But I am with you always. I am with you now, and I will continue to be with you.

Notice the scope of this promise. I am with you always. I am no expert on the original languages or on the Greek, but one possible way of understanding or one alternative way of understanding this word always that is suggested by some is I am with you all of every day.

[31 : 50] Now, I don't know if that is an accurate way of translating it, but it's certainly a very beautiful way of understanding it. I am with you always, all of every day, in every moment of the day, in every circumstance of the day, I am with you.

This is the promise that accompanies the commission. But I think we do need to conclude by noticing the purpose of this promise. And I think we detect the purpose in the final words of Jesus.

I am with you always to the very end of the age. You know, when I was reading this before giving much thought about it, I kind of thought, well, what about beyond the end of the age? I kind of like Jesus to be with me beyond the end of the age.

But of course, that reminds us that this promise has been given in a particular context, in the context of the Great Commission. Jesus is giving his disciples a task to do for a given period of time, until he returns.

This language of to the very end of the age is language that is speaking about until he returns. Indeed, the very same phrase is used in chapter 24 and verse 3, where it's explicitly stated that that's what it means.

[33 : 00] In Matthew 24 and verse 3, we read, as Jesus was sitting in the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. Tell us, they said, when will this happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

And so they see the two things as being together, his coming and the end of the age. And so when Jesus says, I will be with you to the very end of the age, what he's saying is that this promise of his empowering presence is particularly for the task to have.

As we are in this gospel age making disciples, Jesus will be with us. That doesn't mean he won't continue to be with us beyond the end of the age, but the promise is in particular related to the task.

That is the purpose of it. In your disciple-making mission, I am with you. And that guarantees the success of the mission.

That guarantees the power for the mission, the grace for the mission because Jesus is with us. He is with you. So go and make disciples of all nations.

[34 : 12] This is the way to celebrate the resurrection. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your son our savior, Jesus Christ.

We thank you that he is the one to whom has been given all authority on heaven and on earth. We thank you for the great privilege that is ours to be his disciples.

And we ask that as disciples our single most distinguishing mark would be that of obedience. That we would be those who obey Jesus.

That we would be those who in every moment and in every aspect of our lives. Identify that as being our primary calling to live as obedient disciples of our savior.

We pray that you would help us to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. That we would be up and doing and that you would own our efforts.

[35 : 11] however humble and weak that they might seem and indeed be. And we pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.