

**The Essentials of Disciple-Making**  
**Session Two: Marching Orders**  
**Commentary**

**Matthew 28:16-20**

28:16–17. Some time during the forty days of Jesus’ post-resurrection stay on earth (probably soon after they heard the news that Sunday), the eleven disciples and many more of Jesus’ followers proceeded to Galilee, where Jesus had instructed them to go (26:32; 28:7, 10). Here Matthew’s focus was back on the eleven, the foundation stones of his church.

Jesus had apparently specified a particular mountain as their meeting place. (Note mountains as locations for other important events in Matt. 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 26:30.) At the end of the journey, presumably on the designated mountain, they saw him. Imagine their joy! It was only natural that they worshiped him.

But some doubted (the word doubt means “to duplicate,” “to be of two minds,” or “to waver, hesitate”). All wanted to believe, but their faith was weak. Some experienced the internal tug-of-war between “two minds”—the one wanting to follow their fledgling faith and the other wanting to follow “reason.” Even those presented with clear evidence for the truth can still have doubts.

But the word some implied there were others who believed everything they saw. These were the followers of the Messiah-King who would continue on into Acts, willing to take any risk in obedience to their master. This was true faith in action, living on the edge of “risky” obedience.

28:18–20. The Great Commission passage is reminiscent of Acts 1:6–11. In Matthew, Jesus issued a similar commission in different words with a different emphasis. However, the setting in the Acts passage was in Jerusalem. It coincided with Jesus’ ascension into heaven at the end of the forty days. Jesus probably met with the disciples in Galilee and then instructed them to return to Jerusalem. All of this was done in preparation for their receiving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5) and their continuation of his Spirit-empowered ministry in Acts 2 (in Jerusalem). Matthew did not record Jesus’ ascension into heaven, as it likely would have distracted from his emphasis in 28:18–20. He wanted the Great Commission to linger in people’s minds as they finished his Gospel. Jesus had a big job in mind for his followers. All is a key word in 28:18–20. It emphasizes Jesus’ divine identity: all authority, all nations, all things.

Before issuing his commission, Jesus laid the foundation for the success of their future ministry: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. This was critically important. Without the Messiah’s authority, the mission of the disciples and our mission today would be doomed to failure. The reader of Matthew’s Gospel should know well by now the nature and power of the Messiah’s authority.

The heart of the Great Commission is 28:19–20, the last words of Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew knew the principle that “last words are lasting words.” He chose carefully, under the Spirit’s

direction, the words he wanted to linger in his readers' minds. Therefore identified Jesus' authority (28:18) as the reason the disciples must carry out his orders.

The central command is make disciples. At the heart of our mission is the reproduction in others of what Jesus has produced in us: faith, obedience, growth, authority, compassion, love, and a bold, truthful message as his witnesses. They were learners commanded to produce more learners.

Jesus' disciples were to reproduce other disciples of all the nations (the word translated nations is the plural of *ethnos*, meaning "peoples, ethnic groups," as in 24:14). He was hinting that their fulfillment of their commission would ultimately lead to his second coming. It is significant that Matthew ended his Gospel with one more reference to the Gentile mission, challenging the Jewish Christians to lose their prejudices and unify the church. This also challenges us to break down any artificial boundaries erected by our culture. We must minister impartially. Jesus was an equal-opportunity Savior.

We see three participles here that are subordinate to the central command to make disciples. Each of these clarifies the way in which Jesus' disciples are to make disciples.

First, in the emphatic first position, even before make disciples, is the aorist participle *go*. In the context, this Greek participle is best rendered, "when you have gone." "Going" is one of the three means by which to fulfill the central command to make disciples. Going means more than traveling across geographical borders, although this is part of Jesus' meaning. The point is that we believers are active; we are not inert. Going means crossing boundaries to make disciples—going across the street, going to dinner with an unbelieving friend, going into the inner city, going beyond one's comfort zone to make the gospel accessible to the lost. Living life is "going" with a purpose, every day.

Going also implies our support of people who are literally going to other cultures. We must support global outreach financially and support the people going emotionally and personally as well as through prayer. We are a part of their team. In all these ways we "go," in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

We also "go" when we support efforts to equip indigenous ministers in different cultures. We help equip them to lead people of their own culture and language. This enables them to fulfill the Great Commission at home and in cultures where they will find a better reception than we would.

Second, we come to the participle baptizing (present participle of *baptizo* meaning "continually immersing them"). Because baptism was so closely associated with the decision of faith (cf. Acts 2:38; 8:36–38; 10:47–48). It may be best to see baptizing as Jesus' way of summarizing the evangelistic half of the disciples' ministry. The third participle, teaching (Matt. 28:20), represents the other half of the disciples' ministry—the edification of those who are already believers. Baptism is an initiating rite that "immerses" the believer into a whole new world.

Baptism is not a step to salvation. Rather, it is an initial step of obedience that results from a person's decision to trust the Messiah. Baptism represents the identification of people with this new way of life and faith. Baptism should be experienced as soon as possible after a person trusts Christ.

Jesus specified that we are to baptize disciples in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The use of the singular name implies clearly that this listing of three persons should be thought of as one name. Here is a clear affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity—one God, three distinct persons. The believer who chooses to submit to baptism into this name identifies with God's name as well as the spiritual family of all others who are identified with this same name.

This is a good summary of the evangelistic task of the church. It is bringing those who identify with the world into a new identification. It is seeing themselves anew as citizens of God's kingdom, as children of God, as brothers and sisters of the Messiah, and as brothers and sisters with the rest of the family of believers. Our mission is to bring people to a point where they see themselves differently—because they have become different through the transforming work of God's grace.

Third, the participle teaching (present participle of *didasko*, meaning "keep on teaching them") completes the series of three means by which we fulfill the Great Commission. This represents the other half of our mission—the edification or building up of those who are believers. Jesus instructed us not only to teach content, but to train people into obedient action: teaching them to keep everything I have commanded you. The teachings of Jesus recorded in Matthew are the essence of the practical teaching we are to pass on to new disciples. There is much more teaching from Scripture beyond Matthew that the church needs. But his teaching in Matthew serves as a strong foundation.

By fulfilling the teaching portion of the Great Commission, we take believers at every stage of spiritual maturity to the next stage of growth. This can range from the infancy of a brand-new believer to various levels of spiritual adulthood. Every believer should progress toward the perfect character of Christ (Eph. 4:11–16), but none will arrive there short of eternity. So we must see ourselves as learners in a family of teachers, who themselves are also learners. The believer who is most mature will be most ready to listen and learn, even from the newest member of the family (cf. Matt. 18:4).

Matthew's last words are a concluding promise from the Messiah-king. Surely adds a note of assurance, similar to Jesus' "I tell you the truth." A paraphrase of the phrase I am with you always would read, "I myself am continually with you always until the end of the age." Among other things, Jesus claimed omnipresence, again laying claim to deity (note "Immanuel, God with us" in 1:23). He will be with us every step of the way. I am with you always reminds us of the great promises to saints of old like Moses (Exod. 3:12) and Joshua (Josh. 1:5).

This promise complements Jesus' claim to universal authority in Matthew 28:18, and it undergirds the believer's confidence in fulfilling the Great Commission. If we take out the three subordinate participial clauses from 28:18–20, boiling the commission down to its grammatical essence, we end up with this: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, make disciples of all the nations; and surely I am with you always, to the end of the age."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).