**An Examination of Matthew 28:20: What Did Jesus Command Us to Obey?”**

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**Introduction**

1. The Great Commission is well known to all of us here. We are part of a tradition that is historically evangelical (meant in the classical sense of the word). Accordingly, evangelism is one of the core elements of our identity. “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all the things that I have commanded you. And, behold, I am with you all the days until the end of the age.”

Unfortunately, at times it has seemed that this instruction Jesus gave to his disciples has been reduced to getting people to say some sort of sinner’s prayer and then sending them on their way. However, even the briefest look at this commission suggests a much greater investment in each follower, beginning with baptism and continuing into a process of discipleship that involves lengthy instruction focused on the commands of Jesus. Now, of course, we also have the whole New Testament to teach, of which Matthew would eventually become a part.

The Great Commission is the climax of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole. Each gospel looks at Jesus from its own unique vantage point, and each Gospel climaxes in its own way. The Gospel of Mark arguably climaxes at the cross, when the centurion there sees the connection between Jesus’ death and his kingship. The centurion is the first and only person in Mark to confess Jesus as the Son of God and he makes this confession in view of Jesus’ death—a connection that Peter himself had failed to make just a few chapters earlier.

Both Luke and John arguably climax with resurrection appearances. With Luke it is Sunday night, when Jesus appears to his disciples as they are gathered together. In John it is arguably with the confession of Thomas that Jesus is in fact his Lord and God.

However, Matthew climaxes with the Great Commission. Jesus is risen. Both the angel and Jesus himself have already appeared to the women, but in each case the instruction is to go to Galilee. The Great Commission is thus the first time in Matthew that Jesus appears to the eleven disciples in fulfillment of the words already spoken by Jesus and the angel.

Here we have the climax of Matthew. All the energy of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole thus reaches its highest point on this mountain in Galilee. Like a plane that has been gaining speed down the runway, it is here that it takes off and goes into all the world, making disciples of all the nations.

Although in Matthew this Commission is spoken to the disciples, the Gospel of Matthew itself implies that the command extends beyond them. What is the point of Jesus being with his followers to the end of the age as they fulfill this charge if the task of making disciples only applied to the original disciples? Indeed, it is very likely that many of the disciples had already passed by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written. The existence of Matthew itself suggests that the charge to go and make disciples will continue until the end of the age when Christ returns.

2. We know the words of this Commission line by line. “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). We remember that Satan tried to give this authority to Jesus prematurely, before it was time (Matt. 4:8-10). At that point, Jesus had become “lower than the angels for a little while” (cf. Heb. 2:5-9). At that time, Satan was hoping to continue in his role as ruler of this age (John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4).

However, in Matthew 28:18 Jesus has won the victory. He had defeated the one with the power of death (cf. Heb. 2:14). He was going to be seated at the right hand of God the Father, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named (Eph. 1:20-21). God had super-exalted him so that every knee would bow and tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil. 2:9-10).

3. He expects them to go (Matt. 28:19). You may have heard that this word is actually a participle in Greek (an “ing” word), leading some to take the expression something like, “As you go, make disciples.” Hear the good news, this type of participle can actually have a sense of command, and a quick look at Matthew’s use of the form suggests that he tends to use it with commands as a light imperative (cf. 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; also 10:7, 17:27, and 28:7 with slightly different forms). So we do not have to stop preaching that Jesus commanded his disciples to go!

4. What is a disciple? It is a follower, an apprentice, a learner. Jesus fished for people, and his disciples were to become fishers of people as well (Matt. 4:19). According to John, they did a three year internship with him learning how to make disciples. It thus should not be lost on us that one of the things that Jesus commanded the disciples was to “Go and make disciples.” Before we get any further let us get that fact on the table—**a disciple of Jesus makes more disciples of Jesus**.

The mode of making disciples in 28:18-20 is twofold—1) baptizing and 2) teaching. These are modal participles that clarify the way in which the disciples are to make more disciples. They point to baptism as the rite that marks the official beginning of discipledom. Then teaching aims to shape a person into what a disciple of Jesus looks like.

Meanwhile, Jesus is with us and all his followers until he returns at the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). The Gospel of Matthew ends as it begins: with the fact that Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us” (cf. 1:23). We call this literary device an inclusio, which puts the Gospel of Matthew within book ends.

**The Core of Jesus’ Commands**

5. The preceding is introduction. My specific task is to explore the content of discipleship. Jesus instructs his disciples to teach other disciples “to keep all the things that I have commanded you” (28:20). In the Great Commission, these commands are the content of discipleship. It is what followers of Jesus are to become. What are these commands?

We are prone to insert into such a general statement our own cultural assumptions or the biases of our own personalities. For example, an intellectually oriented individual might inadvertently confuse the teaching here with a set of beliefs or a catechism of knowledge. However, the disciples are told to teach the keeping of *commands*,not beliefs or an intellectual worldview.

Some of our holiness forebears might at this point insert assumptions about “dos” and “don’ts.” They might think Jesus is talking about all of God’s expectations of what we are not allowed to do. We might take all of our traditions about what God requires of us and insert them here.

As a side note, the Pilgrim Holiness Church had as its motto, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things, charity.” Similarly, the Wesleyan Methodist Church had in its Articles the idea that only those things that could be shown in Scripture could be expected. Yet both churches in practice regularly included under essentials a host of things that were merely tradition. This is what happens. We unknowingly read our traditions into the Bible.

However, with the Great Commission we are on Matthew’s turf and in Matthew’s world. If we want to know what the Gospel of Matthew means when Jesus says in it to keep all of his commands, then we should look especially at all the things that Jesus commands in Matthew. Crucially, we also need to look at the nature of keeping God’s commands in Matthew.

6. In Matthew, as in Mark, our actions are only the manifestations of our hearts. If we do not understand this fact, then mention of Jesus’ commands might mislead us into the trap of the Pharisees. This is the trap that focuses on external actions as the keeping of commands. This move would be a horrendous mistake for a reader of Matthew, since Matthew is harsher toward Pharisaism than any of the other Gospels (cf. Matt. 23).

In both Matthew 15 and Matthew 5, we get a clear sense of the nature of Jesus’ commands. **They are, first, commands of the heart. Then, secondly, they manifest themselves in certain actions.**

In Matthew 15, the Pharisees are criticizing Jesus because his disciples do not wash their hands before eating. This of course is not a matter of hygiene but a matter of the holiness codes of the Old Testament. The tradition of the elders prescribed hand washing to avoid the possibility of becoming unclean. The situation gives Jesus the opportunity to clarify the true origins of uncleanness, namely, the heart (15:19). The outward acts of murder, adultery, sexual immorality, stealing, lying, and blasphemy all originate in the heart.

7. Similarly, Matthew 5 clarifies what true righteousness is, what truly keeping Jesus’ commands looks like. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus indicates that his purposes are not to destroy the Law and the Prophets (i.e., the Old Testament Scriptures) but to fulfill them. Without reading the rest of the chapter, 5:18-19 might lead someone to the wrong understanding of what Jesus is saying here, for they reference the least of the commandments in the Law. I have heard Christians bind us to the most minute commands in Leviticus by way of these verses (like not trimming the edges of your beard). Jesus here—so the interpretation goes—maintains all the laws of Exodus through Deuteronomy with this statement.

If so, this statement would bring Jesus into flat contradiction not only with the rest of the New Testament but with himself. Are all foods now clean or not? Jesus himself implies not in Mark 7:19. Do we need to go back to offering animal sacrifices or not? The book of Hebrews would indicate not. Do all males need to be circumcised or not? Galatians would strongly argue not.

Thankfully, the rest of Matthew 5 clarifies what Jesus actually means by “fulfilling” the Law. What he means is keeping its heart, its essence, its core. We can get through the first two examples in Matthew 5 without fully appreciating what Jesus is doing here. It is not only about not murdering; it is about not hating others in your heart, which leads to murder. It is not only about not having an affair; it is about not lusting after another woman in your heart. These two are fairly straightforward.

Then we have to go deeper. Divorce was fully allowed in Deuteronomy 24, but Jesus rejects it except in extreme circumstances (Matt. 5:31-32). Why? Because divorce can be a way of legally having an affair. As Steve Deneff eloquently put it a few weeks ago in a sermon, “The law will allow you to do things that love will not.” So part of Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law prohibits at times where the letter of the Law would actually allow.

Similarly, Jesus undercuts the need for oath-taking altogether and thus renders obsolete the literal practice of one of the Ten Commandments (5:33-37). Jesus does not extend the practice of oath-taking, as he did with the commands not to murder or commit adultery. He gets to the heart of the matter and renders the commandment irrelevant. Love tells the truth to others and does not need to take oaths in the first place.

With the law of retribution (5:38-42), fulfilling the Law actually requires us not to keep the Law at all as individuals. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” contradicts the love of one’s neighbor and therefore should not be practiced as an individual. To fulfill the heart of the Law, Jesus removes an element of the Law. Therefore, another part of Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law renders obsolete some parts of the Law.

The final paragraph of Matthew 5 generalizes what it means to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Here Jesus tells his followers not only to love their neighbor but to love their enemies as well. God does the same when he sends rain on the righteous *and* the unrighteous. This is what it means to “be complete as your heavenly Father is complete.” **To fulfill the Law is to love God and love one’s neighbor—including one’s enemy—in all that you do.**

8. That loving God and one’s neighbor captures the essence of all of Jesus’ (and God’s) commands is verified in at least two other places in Matthew. First, there is the Golden Rule in 7:12, which also generalizes the whole Sermon on the Mount. “Everything whatever you would want people to do to you, do also yourself to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 22:34-40 says the same. The first and greatest command is to love God with all our being. Then the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves. “On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets” (22:40). We could stop here. Herein are all the commands of Jesus.

Now we know what discipleship is about at its core. It is about teaching followers of Jesus to love God with all their being and to love their neighbors and enemies as they would themselves. Matthew of course assumes that a person has a healthy sense of him or herself here, leading many to point out that we should “love ourselves” in the sense of having a healthy sense of who we are in God’s eyes.

**Love God**

9. However, as we are prone to say, the Devil is in the details. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves trying to smuggle into the love of God demands that are contrary to the love of neighbor or enemy. I have heard individuals ironically use a definition of the word *neighbor* to argue that the love command only applies to the people right around us, not to people in other parts of the world. This is a technique akin to the lawyer in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, trying to justify himself on a technicality (Luke 10:29).

Alternatively, someone might pit God’s justice against his love as an excuse to get out of loving one’s enemy. Yet Jesus is clear that mercy is more important to God than justice. Twice in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6—“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” James 2:13 states the principle clearly: “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Certainly it is part of the character of God to do justice, but divine justice is always redemptive until there is nothing left to redeem.

Is there ever a point where the love of God and the love of neighbor come into conflict with each other? If so, Scripture never mentions such a time. This is the point of greatest danger, where we try to wiggle out of the love of our neighbor in the name of loving God. We are on safest ground if we assume that these two commands never truly conflict with each other and, indeed, that the love of others is actually the primary way in which we demonstrate our love for God. 1 John 4:20 says, “Those who do not love the brother [or sister] whom they have seen is not able to love the [God] whom they have not seen.” And of course 1 John has in mind very material assistance.

10. So in what does the love of God (and Jesus) consist? **It consists in a complete and ultimate orientation around his lordship.** “You will worship your Lord God and him alone will you serve” (Matt. 4:10). There can be no competitor. Jesus showed the absolute claim of God on all things in his casting out of demons. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11).

Our Wesleyan tradition promotes the true depth of this command when we profess the need for *entire* sanctification. There must not be any thought or action in our lives that is not subject to the sovereignty of God—and it is possible! Other traditions emphasize the sovereignty of God while holding low expectations of our possible submission. We rightly believe that God has made possible what he expects of us. Anything else is the picture of a toy-maker who delights in the failure and torture of his toys.

God will not tolerate any competitors to his lordship. Of all such competing loyalties, he demands repentance if we expect to be part of his kingdom (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). We cannot serve God and money (Matt. 6:24). Coinage is irrelevant in God’s kingdom (22:21). We should not look for earthly approval or worry about material things, for our God will provide what we need (Matt. 6:1-34). Our treasures must be a matter of heaven, not earth.

Even our families are second to God (8:22). The family of God is more our family than our earthly families. Ultimately, we must be willing to take up our cross and follow Jesus to death if submission to God leads us there (11:29).

Two verses in the New Testament capture this dynamic well for me, even though they are not in the Gospel of Matthew. One is Colossians 3:17: “Everything whatever you do in word or deed, [do it] all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” The other is 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Do everything for the glory of God.”

11. How do we apply this command to our current context? A couple years ago, David Drury encapsulated for me what this means in relation to contemporary politics in the United States. He wrote, “Christians are neither conservative nor liberal, but radical.” The notion is that our loyalty is to God and his kingdom, not to any earthly group or ideology.

To love God with all our being requires us to detach from earthly loyalties in deference to divine loyalty. It implies that we will sometimes find ourselves on the outs with just about everyone. Some will like what we say in one area and detest what we say in another. Then other groups will feel the same on exactly the reverse. As Jesus says, “I have come to divide a man from his father and a daughter from her mother” (Matt. 10:35).

Making disciples includes teaching a full orientation around God rather than earth. As Mark says, we love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). We submit our intentions, our lives, our thoughts, and our bodies to the kingdom of God. We must be willing to give up any plan, any ideology, any activity if it comes into conflict with God’s will. Everything must be on the table, including our understandings of the Bible.

This requirement should seem very familiar to us. It is exactly what we mean as Wesleyans when we speak of the complete consecration that must precede entire sanctification. God will not make holy what has not been given to him. He longs for us to ask him to empower our full surrender.

**Love Neighbor/Enemy**

12. His command is to love God, and his command is to love our neighbor and enemy.

What does it mean to love someone? It should be fairly uncontroversial that at least it implies actions that are intended for their benefit and good. I only mention this fact because there are some who would like to define love circularly—whatever God does defines what love is. So if God sends people to eternal fire without giving them a real chance to be saved, then these individuals would say that must be loving.

However, the words of the Bible were revealed in the languages of their authors and audiences. I assure you that in neither Greek nor Hebrew does the word *love* mean “to bring glory to myself by showing my power as I fry people whom I created just so I could fry them.” **Loving one’s neighbor implies acting in a way that is genuinely intended to be in their best interests.**

Further, it is often said that love is not primarily a feeling but a matter of the choices we make toward others. The way Jesus teaches his followers to love in the Gospel of Matthew illustrates what it means to love one’s neighbor and enemy. Jesus’ instructions about how to act toward others have a concreteness to them. Love for Jesus is not just theoretical.

13. We have already discovered perhaps the consummate act of love toward others that Jesus commands in Matthew. He commands his disciples to “go and make disciples.” What could be more loving than telling the good news to the world? Eternal fire is at stake (25:41, 46), not to mention escape of the earthly judgment that will take place upon Christ’s return (24:30).

Jesus’ compassion and healing of the sick illustrates another core principle. Jesus helped those in need. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats captured this value well. The goats are chastised and sent to eternal fire for not helping the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

I have heard some try to wiggle out of this value by noting Jesus mentions “my brothers” in one place in his condemnation: “inasmuch as you did to one of *these brothers* of mine” (25:40). Some attempt to find a loophole here for helping others in general by claiming Jesus only had in mind the sick and the needy *in the church*. We think again of the lawyer in Luke 10 trying to justify himself by asking, “Ah, but who is my neighbor?”

So we come back to Matthew 5, where Jesus indicates that perfect love—love like God’s—is directed toward one’s enemies in addition to one’s own. God gives them sun and rain too. We should see the contrary sentiment for what it is—another Pharisaic excuse trying to get out of the heart of Jesus’ command. Paul puts it this way: “Let us do good *toward all*, especially toward the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). The church may be the focus of our loving energies at times, but Jesus rejects any limitations on our love toward others in general.

14. What are the weightier parts of the Law (23:23)? Justice, mercy, and faith. Justice here is biblical justice, not the justice of Roman or Western law. It is the justice of Micah 6:8 that urges the restoration of those who have been knocked off track by the injustices of the world. Biblical justice overlaps extensively with what has of late been called social justice.

**The application of biblical justice to society is complicated and calls for great expertise in multiple fields.** That the structures of society can be “unloving” is clear (e.g., slavery). Knowing how to better those structures without merely creating different “unloving” structures can at times seem hopeless. Unfortunate, unintended consequences typically lie in wait. The application of the principle as individuals is less difficult but still often complicated by specific situations.

Richard Mouw, former president of Fuller and Houghton grad, once put it well, in my view. He suggested that pastors should especially focus on the big principles. The application of those principles typically requires great expertise in multiple disciplines in which a pastor typically is not an expert. The goal is thus that disciples of Jesus are on the same page with regard to kingdom values—not necessarily on the specifics of how best to enact them. I do not in any way mean this statement as an excuse not to try. Not to try would be akin to the man who buried the money he had been entrusted in the ground.

The heart of the matter is clear enough—willing the good of all people every level. Jesus teaches that we should want all the impoverished to find subsistence. We should want to bring hope to all who are in despair. We should want all individuals to be healthy. We should all want oppression to stop and those fleeing it to find refuge. We should want a system that treats all individuals as equally and fairly as possible. These are Jesus values. They show us the heart behind his commands, which we are to teach as we are making disciples.

15. Faith in Matthew is the trust that God can do the impossible. It is the trust that the woman with a hemorrhage had to be healed, righted of her illness (9:22). It is a faith that God can and wants to right the world. Faith is also what we should teach disciples of Jesus. Better yet, we should model faith in our approach to the world. When the world looks hopeless, when an individual situation looks bleak, we believe in the unseen (2 Cor. 4:18).

Of course there are a host of other examples of Jesus’ teachings that relate to loving others. Do not cause others to stumble (18:6). Work for the reconciliation of those who are alienated or need forgiven, while at the same time protecting the church from their harmful impact (18:15-22). Do not plot the demise of your enemy, nor lust after your neighbor’s spouse, nor be untruthful (Matt. 5).

At every turn, we will be tempted to get off track. Like the lawyer in the story of the Good Samaritan, we may want to find a loophole to loving God and loving our neighbor/enemy. Yet these are the two true absolutes of Christian ethics. There are no exceptions. In all times and in all places, Jesus commands his disciples to love God with their whole being and to love their neighbors as themselves.

**Conclusion**

16. I was not able to find a single command of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew that did not fit neatly under the heading of either loving God or loving neighbor/enemy. These are the values of the kingdom of God. These reveal both the character and the impulses of a disciple of Jesus.

Disciples of Jesus go and make more disciples in every nation because they love the people of every nation and want them to know the good news of God’s reign. They make these disciples by baptizing them, which reflects the washing away of their past sins and their incorporation into the family of God.

Then they teach them the commands of Jesus. These commands are summed up in a complete love and submission to God and a commitment to love one’s neighbor and one’s enemy. This is the content of Jesus’ commands, the instruction we are commanded to teach and obey in the Great Commission.