

That's What It's All About

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Mt. 28:18-20

Throughout the centuries, philosophers have struggled to answer this fundamental question: “What’s it all about?”

Not all cultures are equally curious about ultimate meaning, however. The French, oui. Ancient Greece, oh yeah. In fact, their philosophers were rock stars.

By contrast, here in America our rock stars are, well, rock stars. We’re not overly preoccupied such esoteric falderal. We’re less concerned with what it’s all about and more concerned with how many cupholders it has.

There was one American, however, who boldly went where no one else cared to go. One man who did his darndest to answer this age-old question. His name was Larry LaPrise.

Now, if you’re like most people, that name will not ring a bell. But you know Larry LaPrise’s work. I guarantee it. It goes something like this:

[Scott singing] “You put your right arm in, you take your right arm out, you put your right arm in, and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around. That’s is what it’s all about.”

Another of our noted philosophers, Jimmy Buffett, got right to the heart of the matter for the postmodern generation, when he asked: “Maybe it's all too simple for our brains to figure it out. What if the hokey pokey is all it really is about?” Hmm... kind of makes you proud to be an American, doesn't it?

With all due deference to these one-line wonders, I’m not particularly fond of reductionist language myself—you know, trying to sum up the meaning of life, the universe, and everything in a single phrase. Because you’re almost certain to leave out something really important.

But there are certain pithy sayings that summarize seminal truths, that at least highlight important aspects of “what it’s all about.” Like, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” Those 28 words say a lot about the fundamental nature of relationships.

We’re going to look at another aspect of what it’s all about today from the standpoint of our Christian mission. And that comes from a passage in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 28, verses 18-20. This is sometimes called the Great Commission, and it summarizes the basic principles for the expansion of God’s kingdom through the Church. While these verses do not purport to tell us what *everything* is all about, there’s no denying their strategic centrality.

Let me paraphrase these verses, emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of the language. “*All* authority has been given to me over *all* creation. Therefore, go and make disciples in *all* nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey *all* the things I have commanded you. And, in this effort, I am with you at *all* times and for *all* time.”

I count six specific references to *all* in these three verses, and they represent four different senses in which this Great Commission is *all*-encompassing. So, let’s take the next few minutes to find out what it’s *all* about when it comes to the worldwide mission of the Church.

First, our mission is a Kingdom mission. Verses 19 and 20 are well-known. But you really need v. 18 as well to understand the true nature of what we are called to do.

Why are we to take the gospel to the whole wide world? We could offer a number of different reasons, all legitimate. For example, that people are lost or that God loves them so much. But those are not the reasons given here. This rationale is based on the strategic goals of God’s kingdom. Verse 18 makes two universal claims that become the foundation for verses 19 and 20.

Jesus begins with the words “all authority.” There is a sense in which Christ always had authority, even as God in the flesh. But he set aside his ruling function when he became human, so that he might demonstrate a life lived in dependence on the Father. Now, however, as a result of his faithful humility, he is claiming his right to universal sovereignty as the long-awaited Son of Man.

Dan. 7:13 says: “There before me was a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

This is precisely the authority that Christ is claiming at the end of Matthew’s gospel. Dan. 7 says that that authority is *given* to him. Mt. 28:18 says the same thing—that this authority is *given* to him. Philippians 2:9 confirms that fact: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and *gave* him 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.”

The Son, then, becomes the mediatorial king. He is both a ruler and a reconciler. He reconciles us to a holy God by his sacrificial death. He rules over a universal kingdom. And he claims all authority.

So, Christ’s *right* to rule, is already, right now all-encompassing. It cannot increase. But his *effective* reign, the kingdom over which he exercises control, is still in a building phase. As Heb. 2:7-9 says, beginning with a quote from Psalm 110: “You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.’ In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death.”

Jesus makes two claims. That he has absolute authority. And that he has that absolute authority everywhere. Not only over the people and institutions of this world but over the spiritual forces that govern them. Every knee must bow, that is, all must worship and obey him, precisely because the Father has made him Lord of all.

The disciples anticipated an absolute, messianic monarch. They expected a ruler who would establish a universal empire and subjugate all the nations of the earth. But they were looking for a kingdom with, you know, a little pomp and circumstance—maybe a palace, maybe a cushy job for those on his right and left, maybe a horse-drawn limo for his homies.

But not some kind of spiritual something or other. Not some kind of kingdom kit, where all you really get is a mandate suitable for framing, but you have to go out and build it yourself. Not some kind of Monty Python-esque invisible kingdom that requires imagination to see it. Their world headquarters doesn't even have any walls, for crying out loud. And, yet, they ultimately find Jesus' audacious claims believable, as evidenced by the fact that they risk and ultimately lose their lives to carry out this mandate.

Jesus is enthroned as the all-authoritative ruler of all. And what are the implications of that all-encompassing kingdom? The word *therefore* that opens verse 19 points us to the answer. The second *all* is that our mission is to all people.

What gives us the right to invade people's space and tell them that they must accept Jesus as Lord? Very simple. He *is* Lord, and he told us to do so. Precisely because he is Lord over all, he has the right to rule over their lives. Repentance is not an opportunity that may or may not be right for you. Discipleship is not an option that can be ignored with impunity.

We are sent to all nations, because following Jesus is incumbent on everyone. In the first verse of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is called the son of Abraham—the one through whom God promised to bless all nations way back in Genesis. And, even though his ministry was focused on the nation of Israel, from the very beginning—when the wise men came from the East to honor the infant king—the event we celebrate on this very Sunday of Epiphany, it was clear that Christ's ministry was destined to have a worldwide impact.

“All nations” does not mean *nation-states* in the modern, political sense. These are all *peoples*, definable groups based on heritage and common ancestry and culture. Often the term is used to refer to just the non-Jewish nations. But here the command is based on Christ's universal sovereignty, and since the Jews are already being targeted, this is just a way of saying that they should go to everyone everywhere.

So, what exactly is our mission to all people? Technically, there is only one command in this verse, only one Greek imperative—to make disciples. And what does that mean?

A disciple is a follower or learner. The term is used to describe one who becomes the apprentice of a master, like the disciple of a great artist or a skilled craftsman. So, we are commanded to do more than just evangelism narrowly defined. Evangelism is necessary to complete this mission, but the goal is not merely to make converts but to make

disciples, to bring people beyond a point of commitment into a lifestyle of following the thoughts and actions of Jesus.

The word translated “go” is technically a participle, like *baptizing* and *teaching* that follow. Some have jumped on that fact that to try to say that it means “while you are going.” That fulfilling the Great Commission is not a matter of intentionally creating opportunities to share Christ or of moving to another culture to spread the gospel. You just go about your everyday activities, and while you are going, you’ll be a witness.

Now, it’s true that evangelism can and should be a lifestyle. And it’s true that grammatically the phrase could be translated “while you are going.” And it is undoubtedly true that such a conclusion seems attractive to those who don’t want to go out of their way, let alone out of their country, to make disciples.

But there are at least three reasons why that is most certainly not the meaning of this verse. First, the meaning of a participle depends on the principle verb to which it is connected. When it is governed by an imperative, it often takes on the force of a command.

Imagine a set of instructions that reads, “Cutting only the red and green wires, deactivate the bomb.” Now, even though the word *cutting* is grammatically subordinate to the main command, which is to deactivate the bomb, cutting those wires and only those wires is not just incidental information. Functionally, it is the real imperative—because if you cut the right wires the bomb is effectively deactivated. You can’t just do it as you happen to have scissors in your hand or whenever the cutting urge strikes you. You’ve got to be intentional and do it before the clock ticks down to zero.

It is, however, the context of this command that really lets us know that “going,” intentionally putting yourself in a position to make disciples everywhere, is a must. Jesus is talking to first-century Palestinian Jews, and if you are a first-century Palestinian Jew, you will not make disciples of all nations in the course of your everyday activities, because your everyday going and coming will not take you to Gentile nations. The disciple-making in view here must be intentional, or it simply won’t happen, in the first century or the twenty-first century.

Over the course of history, this commission has sometimes been misunderstood. It is not a command to subjugate nations in the name of Christianity, imposing a culture and

Christianizing the population. To read the verse that way is to ignore the nature of the kingdom we are propagating. Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. It did not come by force of arms. He announces his reign and persuades people to join him in it by becoming his followers. Because loving commitment cannot be forced. Following Christ is an obligation, yes, but it is offered as an invitation.

It is not an imperialistic imposition to take the gospel to another culture. It certainly could be done in that spirit, but it need not be done that way, if those doing the missionary work are informed and sensitive, and if they go in the spirit of Jesus. Actually, quite the contrary is true—to refrain from obeying this Great Commission is the ultimate act of cultural egocentricity. The Good News did not originate with us. It is God's gift to the human race, and sometime someone crossed a barrier in order for us to hear it. So, for us to sit here and enjoy the blessings of Christ's kingdom, as if it were our own personal patrimony, is not respect for other cultures. It is a reprehensible disrespect for the value of people who are created in the image of God and for whom Christ died.

We have seen thus far that our mission finds its origins in Christ's all-encompassing kingdom. That's why our mission is directed to *all* nations. But our mission also means teaching Christ's disciples *all* the things he has communicated to us.

If all you wanted was to put people under God's control, you could just conquer them. If all you wanted was to bring them into a relationship with God, you could just evangelize. But the disciple-making that Christ commands us to do is more holistic. Our mission is to make the disciples like the master, to make the subjects like the king.

This transformation does not happen by magic. Becoming like Christ requires knowing what Christ is like, and that knowledge is not intuitive. It must be learned, and therefore it must be taught. A few quick observations about this training portion of our mission.

We are not just teaching content. It's not simply a list of theological truths. It's not a self-help curriculum. The verse doesn't say to teach them everything I've told you. It says to teach them to *obey* everything I have *commanded* you. Obeying every command is quite different than simply understanding every concept.

What churches typically do, including this one, is to give people information and encourage them to put it to good use. But teaching someone to obey requires far more accountability than we are prepared to handle. Teaching someone to obey requires not

only telling them what to do but modeling that behavior. And observing whether or not they do it right. And if not, correcting them and repeating the lesson. I don't know what the answer to that is; the problem just dawned on me this week, while reading this passage. But I think the modern church has a disconnect here.

Notice as well that this teaching must be Christ-centered. There are lots of things that are interesting to know about, to which Christian thought can make a contribution. And all of these are worthwhile. But in our pursuit of them we cannot abandon the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostolic interpretation of their implications.

Though every generation of believers builds on the last, every generation must re-visit those things that Jesus taught us for itself. Otherwise our point of departure becomes the latest spin about everything he commanded us rather than—everything he commanded us. And at that point our collective conversation turns into a game of theological telephone, which, after a few iterations, doesn't sound anything like what Jesus said in the first place.

When Christ says *everything* I have commanded you, he sets the parameters for our spiritual curriculum. We cannot just teach the parts we think are least challenging or most challenging. We cannot just concentrate on those aspects of discipleship that define our tradition or those that are most likely to attract new members.

Speaking of teaching everything, what happened to other important aspects of our Christian mission, like justice? Well, though justice is not specifically emphasized here, it, too, certainly flows from Christ's announcement of his authority to rule. His values are to be prophetically proclaimed, even to those who do not acknowledge his Lordship. But this passage is not a laundry list of all of the things that are important to God. Though many applications could be made from Christ's universal rule, only one is in view here—a strategic summons to Church expansion.

There is, however, an interesting relationship between the expansion of the Church and the institution of justice in human society. The best long-term response to injustice in any society is the contextualized testimony of a righteous Church. Of course, we can and should fight injustice from afar in places where the Church is weak or non-existent. But outsiders have inherent limitations, and nothing incarnates God's values like his kingdom people who are living them. Weaken the missionary effort and you lose the long-term battle for justice. Period.

Our final *all* in discovering what it's all about tells us that our mission has permanent, 24/7, *always*-available support.

People don't like being sent on a mission without support. You may remember Donald Rumsfeld's infamous December, 2004 town hall meeting with the troops in Iraq. Yes, that's the one in which Army Specialist Thomas Wilson of the Tennessee National Guard asked: "Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to uparmor our vehicles?" Oops! The question drew loud cheers from the 2,300 in attendance. People don't like to be sent on a mission without support.

Christ has sent us on a mission to make disciples across his vast domain. He knows it's hard, so he's made a significant promise of support. First, notice what he promises to do. "I am with you," he says. What does that mean? Well, when things are tough it's nice to know that somebody else understands, that somebody else cares, that somebody else is tracking with us. And God does that. But that kind of solidarity doesn't begin to exhaust the power of this promise.

Imagine that it actually gets cold and snowy sometime this winter. You are driving along in the dark, and your car suddenly sputters and then dies. Fortunately, you are not alone. Your spouse is with you. That makes you feel better. Unfortunately, your spouse has no more idea than you do how to fix the car. Sure, misery loves company, but about now you'd trade your incompetent company for a greasy, ill-mannered mechanic.

When God gives people difficult assignments in Scripture, the mission often comes with the promise that he will be "with" them. But that doesn't mean that he'll be stuck just like you are. He's not just moral support who's in the same predicament as you. He's more than a shoulder to cry on. He can fix it.

When Jacob had to return to his homeland and face Esau, God promised, "I will be *with you*." When God called Moses to lead the nation out of Egypt, he said, "I will be *with you*." When Joshua was tasked with taking Israel into the promised land, God repeated, "I will be *with you*." When Gideon hesitated to face the Midianites, God said, "No problem, I will be *with you*."

That doesn't mean that God will put his arm around them and say, "Good game," when they get your butts kicked. When he says that he will be *with them* in this context, he means that he will intervene supernaturally to insure their success. Don't think that Jesus didn't know his Old Testament. He knew exactly what this promise implied. And when he promised to be "with" us in this epic mission, he was promising to supernaturally energize our efforts, so that the gates of hell cannot stand against us.

"I am with you *always*," he says. God's tech support office doesn't close at 5:00 PM or five minutes before you need help, whichever comes first. It's 24/7. And it doesn't run out in 90 days or a year. Not only is it continuous, it is also permanent. He is with us "until the end of the age." Until the job is done.

If he needs to be with us in the accomplishment of this mission until the end of the age, then that tells us how long this mission will last. This was not just the assignment of a few dazzled disciples on a mountain in Galilee. It is the mission of *all* the Church for *all* time. But, ultimately, it is not just the mission of the Church, but the mission of the risen and reigning Christ. And that is our hope and our strong assurance.

This worldwide disciple-making mission requires a worldwide missionary effort. That has always been a major emphasis here at this church. And we want to strengthen it even further, not because we are especially clever or because it's our niche identity, but because it is the mission to which Christ has called us. A significant number of our people have gone personally to other parts of the world. And others are in the pipeline, praise God.

This is the lifeblood of our missionary outreach—when we go ourselves. Every believer should take the opportunity at some point to see what God is doing around the world. Every believer should seriously consider how God might use his or her gifts in that enterprise. And every believer must step up and send those God calls to go to other peoples.

Knowing the plan of God, sharing the heart of God, answering the call of God to claim that which rightly belongs to him. That, brothers and sisters, is what it's all about.