

Great Commission - Part 1

by John Stott

The Great Commission is not just a command to evangelize, but a call to identify with the world and share the gospel in the same way Jesus Christ identified with humanity.

Duration: 40:02

Scripture: Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:9-20, Luke 24:47, John 20:23, Acts 1:6-8, Acts 2:38, Acts 10:43

Topics: "Great Commission"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the Great Commission and its four essential elements. The first element is the need for believers to have a personal experience of peace before sharing the word of God. The second element is the importance of identifying with the people to whom they are sent, living in the world and understanding their struggles. The third element is the necessity of the Holy Spirit's power in ministry. Lastly, the preacher emphasizes the significance of an authoritative proclamation of the divine terms of peace. The sermon also addresses the misinterpretation of certain verses by the Catholic Church regarding priestly absolution and sacramental confession.

Transcript

My own desire, and I'm sure it is the desire of all of us in these Bible hours, is that we hear not the words of a man, but the word of God. And if I may venture to say this, if I may state this preference, I would very much prefer you to have open upon your lap your Bible and not my script. I think it would be better if you had the word of God and not the words of man on your lap in front of you.

It seems not only appropriate but necessary and even indispensable that the first three Bible studies of the Congress should be concerned with this great word of Christ, his great commission to the church, the mandate which Christ our Lord has given to us and to his whole church. Because in the last resort we engage in evangelistic activity today, not because we want to or we like to or we choose to, but because we have been told to. The church is under orders, the risen Lord, our Lord, has told us to go, to preach, to make disciples, and that ought to be quite enough for us without the need of any further motive or incentive.

Evangelistic inactivity is disobedience. It is therefore right for us to go back to the very beginnings and to re-examine together the church's marching orders. Now this so-called great commission of Jesus, or universal commission as we sometimes call it, occurs in different forms five times in our Bibles.

It comes at the end of each of the four Gospels and it comes in the first chapter of the Acts. There is no need for us to suppose that these are five versions of a single occasion. It is much more probable that during the 40 days which elapsed between the resurrection and the ascension, the risen Jesus repeated the same commission many times, although in different words and with different emphases.

Thus John records what the Lord Jesus said on Easter Day, in the afternoon, the day of the resurrection itself. Matthew records what he said a little later, we don't know how much later, on a mountain in Galilee, when a number of the disciples met him by appointment. Luke, at the end of his Gospel, seems to be giving his own summary of what the Lord said during the whole period of 40 days.

We gather this because immediately before the discourse in question in Luke 24, it is still Easter Day, while immediately after the discourse it is already Ascension Day. And if we didn't know that there were 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, we might imagine from Luke 24 that the one followed the other immediately. But Luke is giving us his own inspired summary of what Jesus said about the Great Commission.

In Acts chapter 1 verses 6 to 8, Luke gives us another version of the commission, the final one, uttered just prior to the ascension. And the fifth version in our Bibles is in Mark chapter 16. Here we are in difficulties because in the overwhelming evidence of the Greek manuscripts, it is universally acknowledged that Mark's original Gospel, or rather the original ending to his Gospel, has been lost.

Now this so-called longer ending of Mark, that is in our King James Authorized Version, is not to be found in any of the best manuscripts, Greek manuscripts. It's certainly a later addition, by another hand, and we must treat it with the greatest caution, and I propose to omit it. Today, therefore, we are concerned with the Johannine version of the commission, the one in John 20, tomorrow with the one in Matthew's Gospel, and on Saturday with the one at the end of Luke's Gospel.

So I bring you back now to John 20 verses 19 onwards. Verse 19. On the evening of that day, Easter Day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them.

Yes, it is the evening of the first Easter Day. For fear of the Jews, the disciples have met, as we know, secretly in hiding behind closed doors. And through these closed doors comes the risen Jesus.

He stands in their midst. Oh, he has already appeared after the resurrection, previous to that afternoon, to Peter, to Mary Magdalene, to the other women, to the two on the road to Emmaus, but this appearance is the first official appearance of the Lord to the twelve, minus Judas and Thomas. His commandment to them is in striking contrast to their actual situation, if you can imagine it.

We think of them in panic, terrified, frightened, and Jesus tells them to have no fear. He gives them peace. He tells them to be of good courage.

Again, they are in hiding, and he tells them to come out of hiding, to throw open the closed doors, and risking dangers of persecution and imprisonment and even death, they are to march out to the spiritual conquest of the world. Now, on this occasion, on the first Easter afternoon, Jesus spoke to them four short sentences. Peace be unto you, as the Father sent me, so send I you.

Receive the Holy Spirit, and whosoever sins you remit, they are remitted, and whosoever sins you retain, they are retained. Four short sentences of greeting, of command, of promise. I propose that in the time

available, we should examine them together.

First, peace be unto you. He said it twice. Verse 19, peace be unto you.

He said it again. Verse 21, peace be unto you. He said it again a week later, when Thomas was present.

Verse 26, peace be unto you. He was evidently anxious that they should have this peace. Oh, we know, of course, that superficially it was only the familiar Jewish greeting, shalom, peace, but there was more, much more here than meets the eye.

As Bishop J.C. Ryle, in his expository thoughts on the Gospels, has written, the first words that our Lord spoke to the disciples afford a beautiful proof of his loving, merciful, tender, thoughtful, pitiful, and compassionate spirit. For when Christ says, peace be unto you, he neither speaks nor gives like the world. When he says, peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you, he needs to add, not as the world giveth, give I unto you.

No, Jesus Christ was actually giving to the twelve the peace which they lacked, and which they needed, and without which they could not go into the world with the gospel. And then Jesus went on to confirm with a sign the word that he has spoken. For he not only said, peace be unto you, he showed them his hands and his side.

That is to say, he gave them visible, tangible evidence that it was he who had died for them, and that he who had died had now risen again. What sort of a peace was this, therefore, that he wanted to give them? What is this peace that you and I need? It has two parts. A, there is peace of conscience through his death.

We know especially in the epistles of Paul that peace is often almost a synonym for reconciliation, peace between man and God in the forgiveness of sins. And that is the first thing that those disciples needed. Those disciples met in the upper room, and met as fellow sinners.

Think what they had done only a few hours before. They had denied and deserted their Lord. And their greatest need after the resurrection was the forgiveness of their sins, and an assurance of forgiveness.

Without these they would be tongue-tied. How could they proclaim a gospel of forgiveness to others, if they had no assurance of forgiveness themselves? How could they beg men and women to be reconciled to God, if they had not been reconciled themselves? And so Christ spoke his word of peace, his word of reconciliation and forgiveness. And then the scars in his hands and in his side, however dimly they may have understood it at that moment, were evidence to them, visible evidence to them, that he who promised them peace had actually made peace by the blood of his cross.

That's what the scars in the hands and side spoke to them. This sin-bearing death of Christ, it was not enough for him to say, peace be to you. He assured them of it by his hands and his side.

His death had an abiding significance. He still carried in his body the marks of his passion. So brethren, our first need, before any one of us can begin to evangelize, is the forgiveness of our sins and the assurance of forgiveness.

And the crucified and risen Jesus still brings the peace that we need to our conscience, still brings reconciliation to God. He still confirms his word of peace with a sign. For tell me, are not the bread and

wine of communion of the Lord's Supper precisely what the hands and the side of Jesus were in the upper room? When we take the bread and drink the wine, does not Jesus say to us again, behold my hands and my side? Is not this the visible token that he gives us today, confirming his word of peace with a sign? But the peace of Christ, the peace that he gave them, involved more than a peace of conscience.

It was also a peace of mind through his resurrection. It's important for us to realize that the disciples who gathered together behind the closed doors that afternoon were not only sinners but doubters. They were one in doubt as well as in sin.

Because despite our Lord's repeated predictions of his death, when his death came it took them by surprise. Their eyes had been blinded, they had not realized or understood that it was going to take place. And when it happened they were shattered.

How could Jesus be the Messiah if he ended his days on a cross, on an accursed tree? The faith, the incipient faith of these disciples lay in ruins and their mind was in turmoil and doubt. And so Jesus came and said, peace, peace be unto you. And the peace that he spoke to them and the sign that he gave to them were for their minds as well as for their consciences.

For the wounded hands and side of Jesus were evidence not only that he had died for their sins but that he'd risen again. And that the one who had risen was the same person as the one who had died. So it's not surprising to read in verse 20, the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

It was the same of course for doubting Thomas a week later, he was glad when he saw the Lord. Unutterable indeed is the joy that we experience when into the dark places of our doubt shines the bright light of the resurrection. The Lord is risen and the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord and the shadows of doubt fell from their minds and that was the peace that he gave to them too.

Now I learned from this brethren that the church's first need before it can hear the commission of Christ to go is a need to hear his word, peace be unto you. Before the church can begin to engage in evangelism it needs an experience and an assurance of forgiveness, peace of conscience through his death banishing sin and peace of mind through his resurrection banishing doubt. And Jesus repeated the word, he said peace be unto you and again peace be unto you, he repeated it for emphasis.

Why it is utterly impossible to preach the gospel of peace to others unless and until we have peace ourselves. Indeed the greatest single reason for the church's evangelistic disobedience is to be found in the church's doubts. We are not sure if our sins are forgiven, we are not sure if we've been reconciled to God, we are not sure whether the gospel is true and so because we doubt we are dumb.

We need to hear again Christ's word of peace, we need to see again his hands and his side and then brethren, then only then when we've heard the word of peace, once we are glad that we've seen the Lord and clearly recognized him as our crucified and our risen Lord and Savior, only then shall we be able to go and indeed nothing will be able to silence us. Have you heard that word of peace? Is there a brother here who lacks peace of conscience or peace of mind? I pray that Jesus Christ will say to you, peace be unto you. And then his second word is, as the Father sent me so send I you.

I venture to say that although these words represent the simplest form of the Great Commission, this form is at the same time its most profound, its most challenging and for that reason its most neglected. That is to say when people talk about the Great Commission they are nearly always referring to the end of

Matthew's gospel, go make disciples etc. This is the earliest form on the resurrection day, it's the simplest in words and it's the profoundest and the most challenging because in these words Jesus did not only give a command to evangelize, the Father sent me, I send you, he gave a pattern of evangelism, as the Father sent me so send I you.

That is we the church is to go into the world today in the same way, in the same mode and manner as the Father sent the Son into the world. The church's mission in the world is to be like Christ's. Jesus Christ was the first missionary and the church's mission is derived from Christ and it is to be modeled upon the mission of Christ.

Well how did the Father send the Son? If it is as the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends the church, the church will never understand how it has been sent by the Son until it understands how the Son was sent by the Father and how is that? Well here are three straightforward answers. First the Father sending of the Son involved birth into the world. When the Son was sent into the world he did not stay in heaven, he came into the world, he was born into the world, nor did he come into the world precisely as he had been through eternity in his pre-existence with the full regalia of his divinity, he didn't come like that.

He emptied himself, he humbled himself, he laid aside his glory, he who was rich beyond all knowledge and splendor became poor. He didn't even come in human disguised like an Old Testament theophany, he actually took on nature, he was made flesh, he was born into the world. Next, b, the Father sending of the Son into the world involved not only birth into the world but life in the world.

For having assumed our nature, he went on to assume our experience. Once the Word was made flesh he dwelt among us, he dwelt among us, he shared our life, he exposed himself to the temptations and the sorrows and the loneliness and the opposition and the scorn which are the lot of mankind. He never shrank from contact with the world, he was in the world as so few of us are.

He mixed freely with publicans and sinners and lepers and harlots, he lived in secular sinful society, he was criticized for it. The self-righteous Pharisees who shrank away from contact with a prostitute threw stones at lepers to make them keep their distance, they criticized him for fraternizing with publicans and sinners, they said this man receives sinners, they snared at him, he eats with them. Yes and indeed he did.

It is our boast, one of the most honorable titles that our Lord has ever been given, is the friend of publicans and sinners. My brother, are you a friend of publicans and sinners? How many publicans and sinners do you have among your friends? Birth into the world, life in the world, and the third thing that was involved in the Father sending the Son into the world was death for the world. That is to say God's Son did more than take upon him our nature, he did more than take upon him our life and our experience in the world, he took upon him our sins as well.

He was not only made flesh, he was made sin and he was made a curse. Now don't misunderstand me, I know as well as anybody here that the sin-bearing death of Jesus in its atoning significance and power was absolutely and utterly unique and we can have no share in it at all. And yet there is a secondary sense in which we too are called to die.

No, not to die for the sins of the world for their atonement, but in another sense to die for the people we seek to serve. Not until the seed is dropped into the ground and died will it bear fruit. The disciple is not above his master.

If anyone serves me, let him follow me. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Follow me where? To crucifixion, to death.

We need to be ready to lay down our lives for those whom we are called to serve, not only in martyrdom, although we pause to honour in our hearts those who have laid down their lives in our own generation, those who are doing it in these very ten days in which we are met here. There are many such, but we are called to lay down our lives also in self-denying and sacrificial service. Yes, and following him who was despised and rejected of men, there are some who know the living death of rejection, of misrepresentation and slander and misunderstanding, of obscurity and ridicule.

It is a kind of living death. Thus, you see, by his birth into the world, by his life in the world, by his death for the world, in one word, God's Son identified himself with the world. He did not stay apart from us.

He was not aloof from us. He made himself one with us. And it is this that was involved in the Father sending the Son into the world.

And now he says, as the Father sent me into the world, so send I you into the world. Before we are told to preach, we are told to go. Before we can make disciples, we must be in the world.

Before we are given a message, we are given a mission. I myself believe that our failure to obey the implications of this command is the greatest weakness of evangelical Christians in our evangelism today. We do not identify.

We are not in the world as Christ was in the world. We believe so strongly and rightly in proclamation that we tend to proclaim our message from a distance. Sometimes we appear to be like people who shout advice to a drowning man from the safety of the seashore.

Or we throw the drowning man a life belt from a safe distance. And we tell him what to do, but we don't dive in to rescue him. We're afraid of getting wet.

We're afraid of worse perils, afraid of sharks and jellyfish and drowning. And we prefer to stay in the dry safety of the seashore. But Jesus Christ did not broadcast salvation from the sky.

He did not throw a life belt from heaven. He visited us. He visited us in great humility.

By birth and life and death, he became one with us. More so one that it was not possible to be more one. He identified himself.

Now our reluctance is to some extent understandable. And I know it is due partly to our sharp evangelical reaction against those liberal and radical theologians who lay such stress on identification today that they've renounced altogether the duty of proclamation. These radicals are saying to us today we must sit down alongside secular man.

And we must listen to what he has to say to us. Well, amen, we must sit down alongside and listen to him. And then they go on, we've really nothing to say to him.

We must let him speak to us. Nothing to say? Since when has the church got nothing to say? Since when has the gospel ceased to be good news? Since when has the church got liberty not to preach it? Now by all means let us sit and listen and learn. But we cannot give up preaching.

Proclamation is the essence of evangelism. And yet true evangelism, evangelism modeled on the ministry of Jesus, is not proclamation without identification any more than it is identification without proclamation. True evangelism involves both together.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God. He is the proclamation of God. But that proclamation was not shouted from heaven in order to be proclaimed.

The Word was made flesh. And that is what we need to do. I tell you frankly it's my own greatest dilemma and problem as a parish minister.

I love to preach the gospel as you do to those who listen to it. I find no greater joy in any ministerial activity than in the exposition of God's Word, whether to believers or unbelievers who come to church or to the open air to listen to it. But how to identify with the people who won't come and listen to it? How to reach them? Are we just going to wait in our little church citadels until the people come to listen? How are we going to go? As the Father sent me, I send you.

How are we to go to these people, to sit down alongside them, to love them, seek to introduce them to the Christ we know and love? I'm not content to shout the gospel at them from some remote and sheltered vantage ground. If only one could be like Jesus and be the friend of publicans and sinners. And if only one could share the gospel with this circle of publicans and sinners with whom one lives and whom one knows.

I don't do that. I thank God for what Billy Graham said last night about penetration. Penetration is another word for identification.

My own hope is if this Congress is going to define evangelism afresh, it will not begin as the Archbishop's Commission began, that to evangelize is to present Christ Jesus. Who to? Where are the people you're presenting him to? The first thing in evangelism is to go into the world and then to present Christ Jesus. We cannot leave out this identification with the world to whom we're called to proclaim.

That brings me, I must hurry on. The third thing, quite briefly, the third word of Jesus is receive the Holy Ghost. You will, I think, have noticed the Trinitarian reference in these verses.

The Church's mission is modeled on the Father's sending of the Son and it is empowered by the Son's sending of the Spirit. I don't myself believe that Jesus gave these disciples a special gift of the Spirit at that moment. His teaching about the Holy Spirit, both in the upper room and during the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, suggests that this was rather a dramatic anticipation of Pentecost.

It was on that day that he gave them the Holy Spirit and poured out the Spirit upon them and endued them with power for the evangelistic task. And that was the promise that he was continuously making to them during the 40 days. And now he breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

He breathed on them in order to confirm his promise of the Spirit with a sign. So that just as before his death and in anticipation of it, he broke the bread and gave it to them and said, this is my body, take, eat it. So before Pentecost and in anticipation of it, he breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

Again, just as he enforced his word of peace by showing them his hands and his side, so he enforced his promise of the Spirit by breathing upon them. And his breath upon them was an outward, a sensible sign, a sign they could feel to confirm and guarantee his promise of the Spirit. And after that experience in the upper room on Easter day, the apostles could never divorce the Son from the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was the Son's breath. Why, he had actually breathed on them when he said, receive the Holy Spirit. And they knew that the Spirit was the gift of Christ, the holy breath of Christ himself.

That brings me to the fourth thing, for the church needs more than power, it needs a message. And the fourth thing Jesus does is to give the church its message. He says, whosoever sins you remit, they're remitted.

Whosoever sins you retain, they're retained. Now I must say a word about the misinterpretation of this verse, but it is on the flimsy foundation of these controversial words, together with certain other words in Matthew 16 and 18, that the church of Rome has built its staggering, rigid structure of priestly absolution and sacramental confession. But this foundation, in the words of Jesus, will not bear the Catholic superstructure.

Without hesitation, we reject this interpretation. It's not any false, it's actually untenable. We can never interpret a text in isolation, and we need to apply to this text, as to every other text, the two major principles of biblical interpretation.

We can never take a text out and examine it in itself, in isolation, and say this means that, and then force the rest of Scripture into it. We must see the text in its double context. First, its historical context, that is, in the moment when it was given, and second, in its biblical context, in the light of the rest of Scripture.

And we look at these briefly. The historical context. In seeking to understand the text, we must ask what the speaker meant by it, and what the hearer has understood by it.

We must be careful not to import into the text false ideas, alien ideas of a later age. So we ask, what did the apostles understand Jesus to mean when he said to them, whosoever sins you remit, they're remitted, etc. Now, the fact that they did not imagine that they were being given priestly authority, or judicial authority, to forgive sins, is abundantly plain from this simple fact, that the apostles neither claimed this authority, nor exercised it.

There is no single occasion in the Acts of the Apostles, or in the Epistles, in which they require people to confess their sins to them, or in which they absolve their sins with priestly or judicial authority. There is no occasion on which they did it. They didn't understand that Jesus had given them that kind of authority.

No. What they did, and what they did constantly, was to preach the Gospel. That is to say, to declare with authority the conditions and terms upon which God is willing to forgive sins.

We find them doing this throughout the Acts and the Epistles, promising pardon to the penitent believer, and threatening judgment to the impenitent unbeliever. And they understood that the authority that Christ had given them was not a priest, not the authority of a priest, but the authority of a preacher. Not a magisterial authority, but a ministerial authority.

And incidentally, if I may add a word as an Anglican clergyman, that the so-called absolution in Reformed Anglican prayer books, which the minister pronounces in public worship, is simply a stylized preaching of the Gospel. That's all it is, what the minister does. He isn't a priest, he is a preacher.

He is preaching the Gospel in a stylized form, declaring the conditions upon which God forgives sins. And then we move on from the historical context to the biblical, which is just as important as the historical. We must allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, particularly when there are parallel passages.

So in this case we ask, what other scriptural evidence is there concerning what the risen Christ was teaching during those 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension regarding the forgiveness of sins? Whosoever sins he forgive, well, what did he teach in those 40 days about forgiveness? And the answer is not far to seek. The parallel passage in Luke records the commission to preach remission of sins and repentance to all the nations. That is, they were not to give remission, but to preach it on certain conditions of repentance and faith.

This then is how we must interpret our Lord's vivid statement, whosoever sins you remit, they are remitted, and whosoever sins you return, they are returned. It is not that he was giving to men authority to remit and to retain sins. It was his dramatic way, and he frequently spoke dramatically, of telling them to preach with authority the circumstances in which God forgives and retains sins.

And both the historical and the biblical context require us to interpret the verse in that way and in no other as the reformers did. So I conclude. Our commission is not only to identify ourselves with the world as Christ did, but to proclaim to the world the gospel of divine forgiveness.

You see, identification and proclamation are brought together in the same paragraph, and the church's message as originally given by Jesus has not changed. Man's greatest need, as we know it in our own hearts, is still the forgiveness of his sins and his reconciliation to God. The whole world is burdened with a bad conscience.

Mental institutions are full of people like this, with guilt feelings. As the head of a mental hospital in England has said, I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness. We have this message to set them free, and we must proclaim it with authority and without compromise, a message of blessing and of judgment, a message of forgiveness to those who repent and believe, and the retention of sins to those who won't repent or believe.

Let me recapitulate. This first form of the Great Commission on the first Easter day, recorded by the Apostle John, has these four marks, these four secrets of evangelism. First, that we need an assured personal experience of peace in our mind, in our conscience.

We have no word to speak until we've heard his word of peace. That's the first thing. Second, we need a humble sacrificial identification with those to whom we're sent.

We must live in the world. Thirdly, we need the power of the Holy Spirit in our ministry. And fourthly, we need an authoritative proclamation of the divine terms of peace.

That was the Lord's, the risen Lord's word to the infant church when it was still in hiding. And this word may yet bring the church out of hiding today.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/11/SID11785.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-stott/great-commission-part-1/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net