

Great Commission

by John Stott

The Great Commission is a call to the church to be gospel heralds, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins on the ground of the name of Christ, and emphasizing the importance of repentance as the condition of forgiveness.

Duration: 38:02

Scripture: Matthew 10:9, Luke 24:44-48, Acts 2:38, Acts 3:19, Acts 17:30

Topics: "Great Commission"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the Great Commission as recorded by Matthew, Luke, and John. The five aspects of the Great Commission, as summarized by Luke, are: proclamation of forgiveness of sins, based on Christ's saving name, conditioned on repentance, to all nations, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The speaker acknowledges that the Church has at times failed in these aspects, distorting the message, forgetting Christ's name, muting the call to repentance, neglecting the unevangelized nations, and lacking spiritual equipment. However, the speaker emphasizes that there is still time for repentance and making amends, and with the increasing population and modern means of communication, the goal of world evangelization remains possible. The sermon concludes by highlighting the importance of the promise of the Holy Spirit's power and the command to wait for it before embarking on the Great Commission.

Transcript

The scripture passage that we're going to read is at the end of the Gospel of Luke. St. Luke's Gospel chapter 24, and we begin to read at verse 44, and read on to the to the end of the paragraph, verse 49. Luke 24 44, Then Jesus said to them, These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things, and behold I send the promise of my father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. Luke's account of the Great Commission differs from that of John and Matthew in that it seems to be a general summary rather than a particular utterance given at a particular time.

Thus we saw a couple of days ago that John records at the end of his gospel what the risen Lord said to the twelve during his first appearance to them in the upper room on Easter day itself. Matthew records an

incident a week or so later when Jesus met the disciples on a mountain side of Galilee, but so far as we can tell Luke is not recording any particular incident during the 40 days. He seems rather to be summarizing what the risen Lord spoke on the subject of the Great Commission during the whole period of the 40 days.

Now we know this, or this at least appears to be so, because these six verses which I have read to you represent the sum total of Christ's teaching between the day of resurrection and the day of ascension. Immediately before this paragraph it is Easter day, immediately after this paragraph it is ascension day, and if we only had Luke's gospel we might have gained the impression that the ascension followed the resurrection on the same day. We know that didn't happen, we know that Luke knew it didn't happen.

It's Luke himself who tells us in Acts 1-3 that 40 days elapsed between the two events. So we must conclude that at the end of Luke's gospel he deliberately gives us a kind of digest of the risen Lord's teaching regarding the church's worldwide mission. Now we begin our study this morning by noticing not the details of the Great Commission that we'll come to in a few moments, but its nature, precisely what it is.

And that is given us by the verb in verse 47. It is translated in most versions preached. It is in fact the Greek verb *kirukthenai*, meaning to be heralded.

And it stands first in the Greek sentence and so receives the chief emphasis. Christ's will and purpose, he says here, is that there should be preached a certain message onto the world. But this is the word upon which the emphasis is laid.

It is that there should be preached something, heralded. He made his church the herald of the gospel, to publish it abroad to the ends of the earth. Now this positive statement about the nature of the commission to preach leads me to two complementary negatives.

And the first is this, the commission of the church is not to reform society, but to preach the gospel. Now certainly, and I don't want to be misunderstood here, it's a matter of emphasis, certainly the disciples of Christ who have themselves embraced the gospel, who are themselves being transformed by the gospel, are intended to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That is, they are to influence society in which they live and work.

And they cannot contract out of their social obligations. They are to help to arrest the corruption of society like salt. They are to illumine the darkness of society like light.

They are to love and serve their generation. They are to play their part in the community as responsible Christian citizens. There is no doubt about that at all in the New Testament.

But, the primary task of the members of Christ's church is to be gospel heralds, rather than social reformers. Secondly, the commission of the church is not to heal the sick, but to preach the gospel. Once again, I'm anxious not to be misunderstood here.

I'm not saying that doctors and nurses should give up their professions. Of course not. They are caring for the sick.

They are seeking to harness medical science to the treatment of the sick, in accordance with the principle of love for your neighbor, so beautifully taught and illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan. I'm

simply saying that the miraculous healing ministry exercised by Jesus and his apostles, namely the instantaneous and complete healing of organic diseases without any medical means, is not part of Christ's general commission to the church. I do not doubt nor deny that God can, and sometimes still does, heal the sick miraculously.

But, the church today has no authority to exercise a regular ministry of miraculous healing. Such miraculous healing was plainly a part of Christ's charge to the twelve and the seventy during his early ministry, and Luke records both charges in chapters nine and ten of his gospel. On these occasions, there is no doubt, it's quite plain, the disciples were commanded not only to preach the gospel, but also to heal the sick, and according to Matthew 10 verse nine, to raise the dead also.

Yes, but we cannot automatically assume that these commands apply to the church today. Unless we are ready to obey as well all the other commands of Christ's mission charge to the twelve and the seventy. Are we prepared, for example, to take with us on our evangelistic campaigns neither food nor money nor spare clothing? Are we prepared to forgo the use of public transport and to walk barefoot? Are we prepared to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? No, these commands, including those to heal the sick and to raise the dead, belong to Christ's charge to those disciples who shared his own healing ministry during the days of his flesh and in the apostolic era.

But, it is of great significance that the great commission that we are considering in Matthew, John, and Luke here, does not include a repetition of these commands. The command of the universal and the great commission by the risen Lord was not to heal the sick, but to preach the gospel. According to this commission, which is still addressed to us then, our primary duty is to be neither reformers of society nor healers of the sick, but rather preachers of the gospel.

Now, having sought, whether we all agree with this or not, having sought to establish that the great commission to the church is to be Christ's heralds in the proclamation of the gospel, we are now in a position to consider the details of this proclamation, and there are five beautiful aspects of it which are given to us here. First, it is a proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. Literally, the great commission here in Luke 24 is that there should be preached the remission of sins.

The gospel of Christ is good news of salvation for sinners, and the foremost meaning of salvation is the forgiveness of sins. Salvation is a bigger word than that, but the primary and first meaning of it is forgiveness. We've already seen how this was confirmed in John's account of the great commission, in which our Lord said, whosoever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven, and so on.

That the gospel is essentially an offer of forgiveness is denied by many in the church today. Some of our modern radical theologians are even daring to assert that man, come of age, needs no forgiveness. He's no longer so conscious of his sins as were his guilt-laden forebears, we are told.

And we are told further that the church must grow out of its age-long obsession with sin. Now biblical Christians cannot even begin to agree with this modern tendency to soft-pedal sin. The scripture says fools make a mock at sin, and we don't propose to be so foolish.

The wages of sin is death, and if sin causes death, the death of man in the garden of Eden, the death of Christ on the cross, the death of the impenitent in hell, if sin causes death, how can we make light of it? Now Jesus Christ has sent us out to be heralds to all nations of the forgiveness of sins. We intend to take sin seriously, and all this means that men of all nations are guilty sinners under the judgment of God, and

their greatest need is forgiveness and reconciliation. Now in this task of the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, we seek not only to obey the forthright command of our risen Lord, but also to follow the example of his apostles.

They were faithful to their commission. Take the Apostle Peter. In the first Christian sermon ever preached on the day of Pentecost, he cried, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Take the Apostle Paul in the synagogue of Pisidia in Antioch, the first sermon of Paul that is recorded in any detail for us. He said, let it be known to you therefore brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed unto you. And that is the first thing about this proclamation.

It is a proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. Two, it is a proclamation of the forgiveness of sins upon the name of Christ. Literally, that there should be preached upon his name, the forgiveness of sins.

The preposition is not in his name, but on his name, epi. It indicates that the name of Christ is to be the ground, or the basis, or the foundation, upon which the offer of forgiveness is made. Now what this means, what it means to proclaim forgiveness upon the basis of the name of Christ, is clearly explained in the preceding three verses.

We read them to you again, verse 44. These are my words I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses, prophets, writings, must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said, it is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached upon this name to all the nations.

The name of the one who has just been described. The Christ upon whose name forgiveness of sins is to be heralded, is in other words the Christ who once suffered for sins, and then rose again. He died to bear our sin and curse in his own body.

He was raised from the dead to demonstrate that his death had been satisfactory for the removal of sin, and he was raised in order that he might apply its benefits to future generations of sinners. And thus Jesus Christ is to be presented by the church to the world as the crucified and risen savior of sinners. And we have no authority whatever to stray from these two central events of the saving career of Christ, his death and resurrection.

Nor can we presume to offer man forgiveness upon any other ground than the name of the Christ who suffered and rose again. For there is salvation in no other. There is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

The church's message was, and still is, and always will be that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was raised according to the scriptures. And we need to proclaim these saving acts. The death and resurrection of Christ, and the offer of forgiveness which they made possible.

So you see we don't just proclaim the cross and the resurrection without going on to the offer of forgiveness that is grounded upon them. Nor do we simply offer forgiveness without proclaiming the saving events upon which the offer is grounded. We proclaim the forgiveness of sins upon the name of the crucified and risen savior.

And we must tell the two together. Then I want to take up this phrase according to the scriptures that comes in 1 Corinthians 15, 3 and 4 that I've just quoted. But this message entrusted by the risen Lord to the church is consistent, he says, first with his earthly teaching before his death and resurrection, second with the teaching of the Old Testament, and thirdly with the future teaching of the apostles.

Let's take the three in turn very briefly. First, Christ's post-resurrection instruction, what he taught during the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, is identical with his earthly teaching. He didn't change his mind.

Verse 44, these are my words, that is what I'm saying to you now, are the words that I spoke to you when I was still with you. What I said then I say now. Secondly, it is consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament.

Verse 44, everything written among me in the law, the prophets and the writings must be fulfilled. So what the Old Testament writer said, the earthly Jesus endorsed. And what the earthly Jesus endorsed, the risen Christ yet further confirmed.

He had no need to contradict after the resurrection or even modify what he had previously taught in the days of his flesh or what the Old Testament authors had taught before him. And thirdly, he implies that the would bear witness to him after his ascension because they had been witnesses of these things. Verse 48, for this witness the apostles had a unique competence.

The apostles had been the eyewitnesses of the life and the death and the resurrection of Christ. And they could bear witness to Christ because of their eyewitness experience. They could bear witness in a way that was utterly impossible to anybody in any succeeding generation.

I want to enlarge on this for a few moments. We are being told by these radical theologians today, there's one for instance in England who is writing, who says this kind of thing. He says John, Peter, and Paul, and Co.

and Company, Incorporated, whatever you say. These early apostles were first century witnesses to Christ. And this English radical says and I'm a 20th century witness to Christ.

And I'm just as good as they are. They're men of the same psychopathology as myself. And he equates himself with these first apostles.

Now this is a doctrine of apostolic succession run riot. This is to make every man an apostle of Jesus Christ. Then it's sheer rubbish.

The only Christ we know is the Apostles Christ. We know no Christ but the Christ the apostles have given us in the New Testament. The only Christ we preach is the Apostles Christ.

What other Christ is there to preach? And the witness of the apostles was unique and it is recorded and enshrined and preserved for us today in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. Now in these verses therefore we have the risen Lord's own authority for believing in the unity and the consistency of the whole of Scripture. We are convinced on the authority of Christ that the fundamental message of the Bible, of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, of the law and the prophets and the writings of the Old Testament and the Gospels, the Epistles, the Acts and the Revelation of the New, is the same message.

It is the offer of forgiveness to sinful men and women on the ground of the name of the crucified and risen Savior. And there is no other message but an offer of forgiveness and there is no other ground for it but the name of Christ. And this is the good news that we have been commissioned to proclaim the Gospel according to Scripture and this Gospel will never change.

Now thirdly, the proclamation that is committed to us is a proclamation of the forgiveness of sins upon the ground of the name of Christ, thirdly on condition of repentance. Literally that there should be heralded upon his name repentance and remission of sins. For the Gospel offer of forgiveness is not unconditional.

It doesn't benefit its hearers willy-nilly whether they hear or whether they refuse to hear. It's clear that sinners cannot be forgiven if they persist in clinging to their sins which they desire to be forgiven. If men desire God to turn from their sins in remission, they must themselves turn from their sins in repentance.

And we are charged to proclaim not only the promise of forgiveness but the condition of forgiveness as well. Remission is the Gospel offer, repentance is the Gospel demand. Now some modern evangelists shrink from this part of the Great Commission, this demand for repentance.

They distinguish between the acceptance of Christ as Saviour and submission to him as Lord. They then insist that the former does not include the latter, and that the latter need only come sometime later afterwards. That is you can get somebody to accept Christ as his Saviour, never speak to him of repentance and the Lordship of Christ, and some weeks, months or years later you can introduce to him the subject of the Lordship of Christ.

This is what some say today. Now while the best advocates of this view at least argue from a good premise, their deduction I want to suggest to you is incorrect. Their premise is that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

And of course with this we wholeheartedly agree. But they then go on to argue however that to add repentance or submission is to introduce good works by the back door. And so determined at all costs and quite rightly to repudiate works as contributing anything to our salvation, they assert that only faith is necessary and that repentance and submission to Christ are not.

Now let me say again that I fully accept as I know all of us here do, the reason for their concern which is the principle of sola gratia, grace alone and sola fides, faith alone. But I cannot accept their logic. The object of faith, of saving faith, is Jesus Christ crucified and risen, crucified Saviour and risen Lord.

That is the object of saving faith. You cannot chop Christ up into pieces. You cannot believe in one piece of Christ and not in the other because there is only one Christ, whole and entire, God and man, Saviour and Lord.

And it's because Christ is one that our response to Christ is one. You can no more divide our response of faith into its constituent elements, accepting one and rejecting others, then you can divide Christ into his constituent elements and say I believe in him as my Saviour but I don't believe in him as my Lord. Jesus Christ is one person called Saviour and Lord and you cannot commit yourself to part of him without committing yourself to the other.

Paul called this response the obedience of faith. It's an unreserved commitment, a total yielding to a total Christ. And Paul called it the obedience of faith because he recognized that saving faith includes an element of repentant submission.

There is no such thing as faith that is not the obedience of faith. Indeed it's inconceivable that a sinner should trust in Christ for salvation and at the same time withhold a part of himself and say I'm not prepared to submit to him as Lord. Salvation is indeed by faith only but true saving faith, full orb saving faith, includes repentance and submission to the Lordship of Christ.

I want to argue further brethren that this is plain from apostolic example. The apostles were very faithful in their demand for repentance. They continually linked it with the remission of sins.

Take the apostle Peter's first two sermons as examples. Repent, he said on the day of Pentecost, his first word incidentally. Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance and remission are linked together. Or again in the next chapter three of Acts, repent and be converted that your sins may be blotted out. No blotting out of sins without repentance.

Truly as the apostle Paul said to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill, God commands all men everywhere to repent. It is an authentic note of gospel preaching and it urgently needs to be recovered by the church today. So we are charged with the proclamation first of the forgiveness of sins, second on the basis of the name of Christ crucified and risen, thirdly on condition of repentance and fourthly to all the nations.

Now as we've seen the charge now is no longer to the last chief of the house of Israel but unto all the Gentiles and it is of course this aspect of the Great Commission which in all its versions receives the greatest emphasis. According to the longer ending of Mark's gospel which as we saw on the first morning though not original, we may note at this point, the church has been sent into all the world to preach the gospel to all the creation. This ministry would quite naturally begin at Jerusalem as Jesus says verse 47 in the province of Judea.

It would then move on to Samaria and finally to the end of the earth, Acts 1 verse 8 and all this is a glorious recognition that Jesus of Nazareth was no mere Jewish teacher founding a Jewish sect. He is the savior of the world. He summons all nations and all men and women in all nations to believe in him and to give him their allegiance.

So the church is fundamentally a missionary society. It is commissioned and committed to proclaim the gospel of salvation to the whole wide world and that leads us to some confession ourselves. For insofar as any inhabitants of the globe have not heard the gospel the church should have a heavy conscience.

Christ sent us to herald forgiveness to all the nations not just some and we've not done so. All the nations have not yet heard the good news of salvation. We failed to fulfill the final commission.

The church has never fully obeyed and fulfilled it. We've been disobedient to our Lord. However we can say to one another that he is still giving us time to repent and to make amends.

It's quite true as the world population explodes the church's task gets larger. The goal of world evangelization seems to recede to become more remote but as modern means of mass communication increase and as the church seeks to mobilize its total membership to infiltrate and penetrate society and as the church gains fresh spiritual power the task appears possible once again. And this fresh spiritual power is in fact the fifth and the last aspect of the great commission that Luke mentions here.

For we are to proclaim the forgiveness of sins upon the name of Christ on condition of repentance to all the nations fifthly in the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 49. Behold I send the promise of my father upon you but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

It is I believe essential to see both this promise of the Holy Spirit's coming and this command to stay in the city until the Spirit had come in their historical context. Jesus was referring without any doubt to the day of Pentecost. It was then that he sent from heaven the promised gift.

As Peter says in Acts 2.33 having received from the father the promise of the Holy Spirit he has poured out this that you both see and hear. But because this day of Pentecost had not yet come when Jesus was giving the great commission the disciples were commanded to tarry until that day. We however live after Pentecost and we have no need to tarry at least in the sense in which they had to tarry.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the Christ who at Pentecost sent the promise of the Spirit the promise of the father to the church gives the same promised Spirit to every believer today. The body of every believer is the temple of the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Spirit is one of the major blessings of the new covenant in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham Galatians 3.14 in Christ Jesus. We receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Yet this undoubted truth of the gift of the Spirit to every believer needs to be qualified in two important respects. Firstly the church of Christ for its holy living and its evangelistic task needs an ever fresh experience of the power of the same Spirit. And secondly there have been some evangelists in days past and still today upon whom the Holy Spirit seems to have come in exceptional measure, mastering them, clothing them, anointing them, empowering them, whatever word you like to use for the proclamation of the gospel, who can stand forth and say the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

It's true in some sense of every Christian that it has been in history particularly true of some. Without the work of the Spirit whether in his general operation or in his special ministries the church's work and witness are bound to be ineffective or the church may be faithful in the proclamation to all the nations of both remission and repentance and the name of Christ but only the Holy Spirit gives power to the proclamation. It's he and only he who convicts sinners of their sin and guilt.

It's he and only he who opens the eyes of the blind to see the truth as it is in Jesus. It's he and only he who draws men to Christ. It's he and only he who enables them by grace to repent and to believe in him and it's he and only he who implants life into dead souls.

So before Christ sent the church into the world he sent the Spirit to the church. The Holy Spirit's presence and power are equally indispensable in our commission and its fulfillment today. Here then are the five aspects of the Great Commission summarized by Luke.

That is we are called to a proclamation. It's a proclamation first of the forgiveness of sins, second on the basis of Christ's saving name who was crucified and rose again, thirdly on condition of repentance, fourthly to all the nations and fifthly in the power of the Spirit. Now confronted by these terms of the Great Commission we have to confess that at each point the church has at some time or other been guilty of failure.

Now distorting the message of forgiveness, now forgetting the name of Christ crucified and risen through whom alone forgiveness is available, now muting the summons to repentance, now enjoying its

comfortable privileges and ignoring the cries of the un-evangelized nations overseas and now betraying a sinful self-confidence and neglecting the spiritual equipment which it has been promised. And we who are sent to call others to repentance need to repent of these things ourselves. That brings me to a summary and a conclusion to review the three versions of the Great Commission recorded by Matthew, Luke, and John.

I find these ten things set out very clearly. Our mandate is the command of Christ to go forth as his heralds, and our warrant is the lordship, the authority of Christ who bids us go. Our gospel is the forgiveness of Christ who died for sinners and rose again, and our demand is repentant faith in Christ Jesus as savior and lord.

Our authority is the name of Christ in whom we preach, and our assurance the peace of Christ that he has spoken to us and that garrisons our hearts and minds and consciences. Our method is the example of Christ who sends us into the world as the father sent him into the world, and our equipment is the spirit of Christ breathed upon us and clothing us. Our task is to be witnesses to Christ to the ends of the earth, and our reward is the presence of Christ to the end of time.

May God give us grace to obey our risen lord's unchanging commission.

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