

“JESUS’ LAST WORDS” **(Matthew 28:16-20)**

Today we reach a milestone – we are finishing the book of Matthew – which we have been studying for about 2 ½ years now – and for many of you, that’s all you’ve heard me preach on. I knew it would take a long time to go through, but I also knew that this section of scripture contained a wide variety of topics – all of them focused on the life of Jesus. Well, today we come to the last five verses of Matthew they are some of the most important verses of the Bible in regards to our purpose for being on earth.

One of the most famous TV commercial slogans came in a series of commercials in the late 70s and early 80s – long before many of you were born – and those were the E.F. Hutton commercials. E.F. Hutton was an expert financial investor, and each commercial would show two people in a crowded place – at a restaurant or on an airplane – and they start talking about the stock market. One of them then says, “Well, my broker is E.F. Hutton, and E.F. Hutton says...” At that point, everything falls silent. Everyone stops what they’re doing and leans in to listen. Then the announcer says in a deep voice, “When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.”

Even as a kid who didn’t know anything about stock market, I knew that E.F. Hutton was someone important you needed to listen to. I think of this commercial as we come to the closing verses of Matthew and Jesus speaks His final words on earth. All of Jesus’ words are important, but when it comes to His last words – that’s when we need to fall silent, lean in, and listen intently to what He has to say because they are vitally important for everyone who claims the name of Christ.

In 28:16-20 Matthew says, Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

In these verses we see the location where His final words are delivered, the audience who receives them, and the content of those words. Sometime after Jesus’ resurrection – perhaps a few weeks or so – the eleven disciples – minus Judas – travel back to Galilee as Jesus had instructed them. Galilee is where all of the disciples – except Judas – were from – and many of them were fishermen whom Jesus called to leave their nets and follow Him. Now they’re going back at where it all started. Jesus told them He would meet them on a mountain – which mountain, we do not know – but possibly it was the place where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus made numerous appearances to people after His resurrection, including appearing to more than 500 people at one time. Some think that this large group of followers was with the eleven when Jesus met with them. We do not know. When Jesus’ disciples see Him, they worship Him. They had always worshipped Jesus, but this is different. Jesus is risen, and worship takes on a whole new meaning – more joy, more wonder, more understanding of who Jesus is and the purpose for which He came to earth.

They worship Him, but Matthew says, “Some doubted.” One of the things that makes the Bible so authentic and trustworthy is that it does not gloss over things that might best be left unmentioned. A skeptic might read this and say, “Look, even Jesus’ disciples doubted that He was really risen,” and they proceed to use that as ammunition against Christianity. Matthew, however, simply records the truth, and that is that some – perhaps some of the 500 – doubted.

The Greek word for doubted here means “hesitate.” It’s not the kind of doubt that means that they’ve made up their minds that this person standing before them is not Jesus, but it’s the kind of doubt that means they’re not quite sure. Doubt is a normal human reaction to something you something out of the ordinary you haven’t seen or experienced.

God has so designed life that we walk by faith and not by sight, and part of living by faith is having doubts from time to time. Doubt, however, can lead to even more resilient faith, and we know that whatever doubts Jesus’ disciples had was erased by the time we get to the book of Acts, where they are fully convinced of the resurrection and it energizes them to spread the good news of the gospel.

With the eleven disciples gathered around Him on the mountain, Jesus delivers His final words – very famous words that every believer needs to lean forward and listen to. They are words that explain why God has left us here on earth and why we exist as a church. Jesus’ final words can be divided into three parts – He makes a great claim to believe, He gives a great commission to fulfill, and He makes a great promise to trust.

We begin with **His great claim**. Verse 18... “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” I can’t think of a greater claim than this! It means that Jesus is in charge of everything, and this authority has been given to Him by the Father. When I first read this I thought, “Why is Jesus making this claim now? Doesn’t He already have authority?” Back in 11:27 Jesus says that all things – which must include authority – has been committed to Him by the Father. He not only stated His authority, but He validated it throughout the whole book of Matthew by His many miracles showing authority over disease, over nature, over demons, and over death. His teaching also demonstrated His great authority, claiming to speak the very words of God.

Yet, in Philippians 2 we read that Jesus limited His authority on earth to some degree. He emptied Himself of what was rightfully His as God, and at no time while on earth did He call on His privilege as God. During His ministry Jesus did not have a place to lay His head. Instead, He humbled Himself as a servant and submitted Himself to the will of His Father to die on the cross. But now He claims *no limit* – all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. So what changed?

What has changed is that Jesus has completed His mission in coming to earth to live the perfect life we could not live and die as our substitute on the cross, and rose from the grave to validate His claim to be the Son of God. Philippians 2:9-10 says, “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.” Jesus had all authority prior to coming to earth, but limited His authority while on earth. Now that He is risen, all authority has been given to Him *without limits*.

When we think of authority, we naturally think of someone with the power and the ability to get things done. But authority is not just the *ability* to do something – it’s the *right* to do something. For example, in sports an athlete has the power and ability to move the ball down the field or up the court, but the referee has the authority to restrict or penalize or disqualify the athlete’s power and ability. The athlete may have enormous popularity with the fans and a huge shoe contract, while all the referee has is a whistle. But the authority of the referee trumps the ability of the athlete. What the referee claims in the sports world, Jesus claims over the entire universe – and no one can overrule His authority.

All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Notice the scope of this authority: All. All means all. As God, He is sovereign over everything – He’s in charge and He calls the shots. Note also the sphere of His authority: All authority in heaven and on earth. He has authority over the *unseen* spiritual world, over angels, over demons, and over Satan. Every heavenly being must submit to the authority of Jesus.

He has authority over what is *seen* on earth – over people, over nations, over institutions, over rulers. By His resurrection, Jesus has authority over death, and the power to raise the dead to life. And He has the authority to judge and hold every person accountable. Whether or not people submit to Him, everyone is under the authority of Christ.

Having given His great claim of authority, Jesus goes on in verse 19 to give **His great commission**. In the dictionary a “commission” is authorizing someone to carry out a mission or task on their behalf. Jesus says, “Therefore... because all authority has been given to me, I am commissioning you with a grand assignment. These are your marching orders.” Jesus will ascend back to heaven soon after meeting with His disciples on the mountain, and these are His final words of instruction – here’s why I’m leaving you on earth – here’s what I want you to do until I come back.

Verse 19, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This is our great commission. In the Greek, there is one main verb in this sentence – one main command – and that is to “make disciples.” Then there are three participles that tell us *how* to make disciples – the words going, baptizing, and teaching. In His final words Jesus says, “Your great commission – the thing I want you to do above everything else – is to make disciples. You eleven are my disciples – I want you go and make more disciples.”

What’s a disciple? A disciple is a follower and learner. In Jesus’ day Jewish rabbis would take young men on as students or apprentices, and their students literally followed them around and imitated them. They would leave everything they owned to live with the rabbi, serve him, sit at his feet, watch him intently, and follow His example. They became so identified with their master that His life became their life.

This is what Jesus did with the twelve disciples – He called them to leave everything behind to come sit at His feet, observe His life, and follow His example – to the point that His life became their life. Now Jesus says, go and multiply yourself – make more disciples. That’s what the book of Acts is all about, telling the story of how this small band of eleven disciples and a handful of other believers went from Judea to Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world fulfilling the great commission – spreading the gospel and making disciples. Historians estimate that by the end of the first century there were over 100 million Christians. And the great commission continues today – we are but the latest generation assigned to make disciples of all nations.

The three participles in the great commission tell us *how* we make disciples. The first participle is “**going**.” If we are to make disciples of people who do not know the Lord, we must go to where they are. This is exactly what Jesus did. Matthew 9:36 says, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.” Jesus didn’t wait for people to come to Him – He went to the people.

Making disciples begins with telling lost people the good news of salvation. Mark 16:15 Jesus says, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” The gospel means “good news.” For there to be good news, there first must be bad news. The bad news is that every person has sinned and is separated from a holy God, and the penalty for sin is eternal death. The good news is that Jesus came to die for our sins, and when we receive Him as our Savior, our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life. All of us who have received His forgiveness are commissioned to go and spread the good news to others.

Paul says in Romans 10:14 says, “How will people hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). God has chosen you and me to be the messengers of the gospel. Sometimes preaching will be formal, like I am doing right now, and sometimes it will be informal, where you share Christ with someone over a cup of coffee with a friend or over the fence with your neighbor. We’re all commissioned to witness to others the good news of salvation in Christ.

The word “go” in the Great Commission is a present participle that means “as you are going.” We are to share the good news of Jesus wherever we go. Throughout our day we all go different places – we go to work, we go to the post office, we to the grocery store, and we go on social media. We sometimes think that evangelism is something we do here at church – and we do – but we don’t expect unbelievers to come to us – we go to them through the everyday course of life.

I love the analogy Jesus made between evangelism and fishing. He said, “I will make you fishers of men.” Where do fisherman fish? They fish where the fish are. You can fill your bathtub with water and drop a line in it, but you’re not going to catch any fish. The only way to be fishers of men is to go beyond the walls of the church building to where people are. It may be people you know at work, people that live by you, or people you share a common interest in. You intentionally get to know them, you begin praying for them, you serve them through good deeds, and you look for opportunities to open up a conversation about spiritual things. Like fishing, you rarely catch a fish on your first cast. Sometimes you’ll hit a snag, sometimes you’ll get discouraged that you’re not catching anything, but you keep casting and leave the results up to God. You may get the privilege of praying with someone to receive Christ or you might one in a long line of people God uses to draw them closer to trusting Him. To make disciples, we must “go.”

The second participle is “**baptizing.**” Once a person becomes a Christian, they are commanded in the Bible to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the clearest statements of the trinity in the Bible. The trinity is what makes Christianity unique and set apart from all other religions and belief systems. Notice that it says baptizing them in the name – singular – of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It means that the three persons of the trinity are one – equally God. To be baptized in the name of someone meant that you were pledging your undivided trust and allegiance to them – that your whole identity is now wrapped up in following and serving the triune God.

The Greek word for baptism, *baptizo*, means “to dip or immerse.” Before it became a biblical word, it was a common, everyday Greek word. For example, when ladies went down to the river to wash their clothes, they baptized their clothes into the water. They immersed it. A fabric that was being dyed was dipped, or baptized into the dye to change its color. So it is when a people is immersed in the waters of baptism, it’s symbolizing a change that’s taken place – they are a new creation in Christ – they’ve been converted from darkness to light, from death to life, from being separated from sin to God, and being made right with God by His forgiveness.

Baptism is the public declaration of your faith. In the New Testament there was no such thing as a secret Christian. If you made a decision to follow Christ you needed to come out publicly and declare your faith – which often came a great cost. In the early church taking a public stand for Christ means that you could lose your home, your family, or even your life. In baptism you take a stand – you say to the world that you belong to Christ and you are pledging allegiance to His kingdom.

In the early church baptism not only identified you with Christ, but with other believers. When someone was baptized it said, “You are one of us. You’re our brother – you’re our sister in Christ.” Baptism brought you into the larger body of Christ where you can continue to grow as a Christian and use your gifts to serve others.

The third participle is “**teaching**”... teaching them to obey everything I commanded you.” This is a vital part of making disciples. Let’s say that go out and you share the gospel with someone, and over the course of time they make a decision to trust Christ. You then bring them into the church and they’re baptized and become part of the local church. Then what? It’s kind of like you have a newborn baby in Christ – what do you do with this baby? Well, a baby needs lots of things. They need care, they need nourishment, and as they get older they need to be taught the basic fundamentals of life so that they grow to be fully-mature adults. Nobody wants a twenty-two year-old to act like a two-year old. The goal of discipleship is maturity.

Paul puts it this way in Colossians 1:28... “We continue to preach Christ to each person, using all wisdom to warn and to teach everyone, in order to bring each one into God’s presence as a mature person in Christ.” God’s will for every believer is that we grow up to be like Christ – so that we do what He does, say what He says, and go where He goes. Discipleship is a life-long process that does not end until we die and are made perfect in Christ. Paul says in Philippians that even after 30 years of following Christ, he had not yet reached maturity in Christ. He still had not yet arrived to the place where he could say He was like Christ. He was still learning. But he pressed on toward that goal, knowing that one day He would stand before God in heaven complete in Jesus Christ.

In order to be like Christ, disciples must be taught – not just taught information – but taught to obey everything that Christ commands. A disciple is someone who sits at the feet of their teacher and listens and learns – and then they take what has been taught to them and put it into practice. Discipleship, then, involves both learning and doing.

No matter how long you’ve been a Christian, there is always something more to learn. Learning begins, of course, with knowledge. A few generations ago, it could be assumed that most people had some knowledge of the Bible, but that can no longer be assumed. Many people today have no idea who Noah was or what John 3:16 says.

Ephesians 4 likens a person without knowledge to an infant, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of doctrine. An experienced fisherman might be able to withstand a powerful storm at sea, but not a baby. New believers who are not discipled and taught are vulnerable to be controlled by their emotions and circumstances. But discipled Christians are more grounded in what they believe. Those who are not discipled are more prone to believe things that are not true and fall for false teaching, but mature believers are able to discern between right and wrong.

Our commission as a church and for each of us as individuals, is to teach God’s Word. If you’re a parent, read Bible stories to your children, and as Deuteronomy 6 says – look for opportunities to teach them about God and His commands as you go about your day. If you’ve been a Christian for a while and know the Bible, look for opportunities to take someone younger in the faith and teach them – be their mentor – show them the ropes of the Christian faith and help guide them through bumpy learning process. We try to offer several opportunities for you to be taught God’s Word through a number of Bible studies, Tuesday night’s discipleship course, and Tuesday night’s class right here in the sanctuary. We try to lay out the food, and invite you to come and taste and eat.

Also part of our commission is to teach the “whole counsel” of God’s Word, as Paul says in Acts 20. Everything in the Bible is God’s Word and we are to faithfully teach it all – not just the verses that make us feel good, not just the commands that are politically correct and “acceptable” in culture, not just the parts that we like – we are to teach everything because it’s all God’s Word.

But our teaching is not about just passing on information and knowledge, but teaching people to obey what they've been taught. As James says, we are to be doers of the word and not just hearers only. Knowledge without application is just knowledge – you may know a lot of things about the Bible, but it doesn't transform your life. Real transformation, real growth, begins to take place when we hear what the Bible says and then we do it.

This is revealed in two specific ways: in our *character* and in our *service*. In John 13:35 Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The depth and maturity of our discipleship will be evidenced in the way we treat people, how we talk to them, and how we resolve conflicts with them. Jesus talked much in the Sermon on the Mount about integrating inward character with outward behavior, so that what we do is a reflection of who we are – so that we not only not murder someone, but we do not harbor hate and bitterness towards them – so that we not only not commit adultery, but we do not lust in our heart. Discipleship is a transformation that takes place from the inside out as we diligently apply Christ's teachings to our life.

Obedying His teachings is also evidenced in service. He wants us to take the knowledge we've learned and put it to use in service to others. Jesus talks about this in the parable of the sower where He says, “The one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:23).

Being a disciple is not just about sitting and receiving instruction, like what is happening right now. What we learn has to be put into use. We learn and then we practice what we learn. Otherwise, we become fat disciples – always taking in teaching, but not doing any exercise. The great commission is full of action verbs and participles – go, make, baptize, teach – and the Lord commissions every believer to be actively involved in this great endeavor.

Jesus' final words end with a great promise. Verse 20, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Going out making disciples in a dark, hostile world and going up against the forces of evil is intimidating and frightening. When God told Moses to confront Pharaoh – the most powerful ruler in the world, Moses said, “I don't know about that – who am I that I should go?” God said, “I will be with you – you will not go alone.” When God commanded Joshua to defeat Israel's enemies and possess the promised land, He said, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). And now as the eleven are commissioned to go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples, Jesus promises that He will be with them. You will not be alone.

This gives us great confidence as we go into a hostile world. No matter where we go or what we face, the Lord is there with us. Even if we die for fulfilling the great commission – as many have – God is with them and as Paul said, “To live is Christ, to die is gain. As long as God gives me breath, I will keep spreading the Word, and if I lose my head for doing it, I go right into the presence of the Lord in heaven.”

Jesus says, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Right now we are in the age of the great commission – we are to keep going and making disciples, baptizing and teaching until the age ends, and it ends with the Second Coming of Jesus. Each generation is responsible to take the baton from the previous generation and continuing the mission. It's a commission we must take very seriously – especially as our world grows increasingly dark. Jesus' final words to you and me are our marching orders – because He has been given authority over all things – we are to go and make disciples of all nations – baptizing and teaching them – and as we go, Christ goes with us all the way until our commission is completed.

