

**Sermon for Sunday, April 15, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Resurrection and Mission**  
**Matthew 28:16-20**

*Matt 28:16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

For a few years I spent time with "Mike," an atheistic professor who lived near me. Our wives were friends and we talked about everything, even theology. One evening we discussed Jesus' resurrection for hours. At length he said, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is compelling. But that doesn't make me a Christian. Strange things happen. We haven't fathomed all the rules of the cosmos. But even if Jesus did rise from the dead, that doesn't obligate me to believe in him or obey him."

Mike saw where the truth of the resurrection was heading and he wanted to cut that off. Mike wanted to live his life according to his own rules, not the rules of Jesus. And he realized that the faith doesn't just say Jesus rose. It says his resurrection demonstrates that he is Lord. As Lord, he has the power to give life and the right to summon people to follow him.

As we just saw, Jesus commands his people, "Make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This is familiar to Christians but it is controversial in wider society. In fact, it's one of the things secular people find most offensive about our faith.

We call it evangelism; they call it proselytizing. The concept is the same: to try to persuade someone to come over to new ideas or a new faith, but in practice, it's a bit of an insult. "Don't proselytize. Don't try to convert me. I don't want to be your project." Why do people resist? Some are like Mike. They want to live as they please, by their own standards or pleasures.

But if we want to fulfill the great commission, we have to recognize that many Americans have substantial objections to Christianity. Jesus said, "Make disciples of the nations," but not everyone wants to be discipled. Let's consider why.

### **1. Resistance to our mission – the cultural landscape**

Ross Douthat is a Christian who writes for the New York Times, Atlantic Monthly, Wall Street Journal, and more. His new book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* examines the decline of Christianity in America in the last 40 plus years. He proposes several factors that have damaged the credibility or plausibility. I'll begin with one that everyone agrees is an issue.

#### **Changing sexual ethics**

For the secular person, the sexual revolution makes the biblical sex ethic look unreasonable. If premarital sex is so common and premarital cohabitation is now normal, Christian ethics seems implausible. Society says we should fulfill our desires, that it's unhealthy – even impossible – to deny them. People come to physical maturity as early as ever. Society says people are adults, ready to marry,

later than ever. And the church says, "Wait" for a decade or more. The church's ethic seems impossible, unhealthy, regressive.

The secular argument goes like this: The laws against extra-marital sex adultery were necessary long ago, for social reasons. They prevented birth outside marriage. They protected women, who were so dependent on men. But now we can prevent unwanted pregnancies and births. Today's women are educated, liberated, and need not depend on men any longer. So the rationale for prohibiting sexual freedom is outdated. People should be free to choose their lifestyle.

In fact, these ideas are disastrous. Every study shows that pre-marital cohabitation hurts marriages. While it's true that our culture delays adulthood and marriage, we haven't chosen it, we've drifted into it. There are few good reasons to avoid adulthood and marriage. If you're twenty-four years old and married, you can still tour Europe.

### **Politics**

The **political polarization** between the Left and Right drew many churches into their controversy. Mainline Protestants went left and evangelicals went right. The shift has weakened the church's credibility. How so? Many now see the church as a tool of politics, appendages or pawns, rather than an outside voice speaking into politics.

I think there is something to this. God ordained that Israel's prophets and priests check kingly power. It can be dangerous when political and spiritual powers agree on everything. Prophets were supposed to tell kings when they were wrong and the great ones did just that. No party has a monopoly on God's truth. But I've had conversations with many people who confuse conservative Christianity and conservative politics. (Rush Limbaugh is not a theologian.)

Take our prisons. America has the world's highest prison rate. Conservatives tend to want strict justice for criminal activity. Lock them up. Make society safe. The Bible has a penal code where the punishment fits the crime. Thieves, for example, pay heavy restitution, but they don't go to jail. We can't reconstruct ancient Israel, but since the Bible never prescribes prison, we should consider alternatives to prison for non-violent offenders.

### **Economics**

The rising power of the Third World and the dawn of globalization give the impression that Christianity is imperialistic. The charge: Christians supported Europe's record of colonialism, racism, and anti-Semitism. More important, prosperity seems to work against faith. Who needs God, people think, when we have science and material prosperity? It's a sad misunderstanding of the faith.

### **Naturalism and pluralism**

Here is a strange paradox. College grads go to church more than high school grads. Professionals go to church far more than drop-outs. Yet our culture's elites in the media, the academy and the arts, sometimes in government and business, rule that supernatural religion is out of bounds.

Christians give God the central role in explaining the shape of life in this world. The elites will draw on natural forces. The Christians says we should love our families, our neighbors, even our enemies, because God is love.

Evolutionary theory says people who behave lovingly or altruistically are more likely to get their genes passed on. Loving people find mates. Neighbors help them when in need. Evolutionary biology says we don't love because love is right. We love because it's an effective strategy for survival.

Elite culture, guardians of discourse, favor scientific, naturalistic explanations, which exclude God. They don't prove Christianity wrong, they ignore it. They bypass it. Love of God is now the love that must not be spoken.

### **The failures of Christians**

Sadly, the faith declines due to self-inflicted wounds – churches rigid traditions, boring sermons or judgmental people. It's not a real community, it's a social club – one that's always asking for money. Churches aren't friendly, they exclude my group – old or young, single or married, male or female, they ignore me. The church is full of power struggles, people pleasers, hypocrites, wicked, vain and stupid leaders. Also the church doesn't welcome sinners. But the church is full of sinners – sins that aren't even interesting, just irritating. It's all true – and more.

These are just five reasons why the Western church struggles today. Yet Jesus doesn't tell the church to hold its ground, he says, "Disciple the nations." Why?

## **2. The Source of Mission – The Character of God**

God revealed himself to Moses saying He is "the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished..."

This description shows that God is both loving and just. The passage says God abounds in love, that he maintains love – he loves faithfully. He is compassionate – compassion is the feeling of love. God rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep; he empathizes with us. He is gracious, which means he shows love to the undeserving. God is also just – "He does not leave the guilty unpunished." When Moses says God forgives wickedness that implies that he sees sin and is offended by it.

These two great traits, love and justice, together drive God's plan to send Jesus, the Son, to this world. The evils of humanity grieve and offend God. Yet his compassion impels him to rescue humans from their plight, through Incarnation.

### **The action of God**

Because Jesus has a beautiful character, divine power, and boundless wisdom, the people who met Jesus were drawn to him. Sadly Jesus' very popularity made the authorities suspicious of him. And of course, Jesus was a reformer, since every society needs reform. So he criticized and corrected and the powers turned against Jesus. As they saw it, Jesus blasphemously claimed the prerogative of God, placed himself above the law, challenged God-given authorities and commanded a following that might lead to deadly rebellion. With a mix of self-righteousness, self-protection and brutal injustice, they decided to kill Jesus.

This was both an injustice and tragedy, yet God knows how to bring good out of evil. Peter said it this way: Jesus "was handed over to you (be killed) by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23).

So wicked men killed Jesus, yet God had a set purpose in it. Specifically, on the cross, Jesus bore our guilt, shame, and punishment. The core punishment for sinning against God is separation from God. That is the essence of hell – separation from God – and Jesus bore or endured that for us on the cross.

So Jesus' death was a tragedy but not a defeat. Jesus exhausted the penalty of sin on the cross. He proved it Resurrection Day when he rose from the grave, full of life, walking, talking, eating and teaching again.

That's why something strange happened after Jesus' death. The Romans knew how to end troublesome movements; cut off the head and the beast dies. They killed Jesus as they had killed many others - in a public execution.

But instead of disintegrating, the movement spread across the world. The early church had no allies, no funds, no media, no schools. The story of Jesus spread mouth to mouth and by hand-copied texts. People gathered to worship, to hear instruction, and to care for each other. In a few generations, the movement spread all through Israel and the major cities of the Empire.

The church spread even though Christians could be plundered, jailed, exiled, sometimes even executed for their faith. A Roman governor Pliny wrote Emperor Trajan about this in 112 A.D. Christianity was spreading like a contagion in his area. He suspected that he should punish Christians for disloyalty, but wasn't sure, so he reported and asked the emperor's counsel. When someone is "denounced" as a Christian, he says, "I interrogated [them]; those who confessed I interrogated [again], threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed."

Pliny didn't think the faith was dangerous in itself. The Christians worship "on a fixed day before dawn," share a meal, and swear to live with integrity. But it's a "forbidden political association" and a superstition, so he is willing to eradicate it by torture and execution if necessary. "Whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished." Some denied that they were Christians. If they "worshipped [the emperor's] image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ," the governor released them.

### **Knowledge of God and hunger for more**

The essence holds in many lands today. How can the faith grow despite such opposition? It grows when people want to know God, when they long for something beyond this fractured life. The church has its flaws. But it is a community of love, moral direction, aspiration. The resurrection says there is hope in darkness and a point to suffering. Some say that sounds like flight from this world. But the resurrection of Jesus affirms the goodness of this creation. God cares for his physical creation, even if he cares yet more for our spirits.

Beyond that, Jesus offers knowledge of God, a relationship with God. For this we hunger. This is what God offers beyond a renewed world, beyond moral direction and hope in darkness. He offers knowledge of Jesus, truly God, truly good, truly man, teacher, example and Lord.

People have many concepts of Jesus; many have at least an element of truth.

- Jesus is a teacher, telling us about God and neighbor; what we owe each one.
- He is a friend and counselor and comforter in a dark hour.
- He is a role model. He guides. We *can* ask, "What would Jesus do?" More, he renews, empowers, and inspires us.
- He is a refuge in crisis and emergency. He runs the ER and fire department.
- He's like a governor or a judge; his threats of punishment keep people in line.

Most of all, Jesus is like a superb teacher or coach. He is the rare sort who can teach a large crowd or mentor students one by one. The rare sort who has all the skill, all the experience, all the self-awareness. He is at the pinnacle of his craft and wants to pass on every bit of it. No, you will never match him, but He wants you to know Him, know his ways, and become a master too.

### 3. The content of the mission: Make disciples

You and I can know the Master and become like Him. That's Jesus' goal for us. Matthew's gospel ends there: Jesus meets his disciples and giving them a charge – "the Great Commission." The label fits; it is a grand commission. His disciples must disciple the nations.

On Resurrection morning, an angel ordered that the disciples meet Jesus on a certain mountain in Galilee 28:7. The disciples obeyed, going to the mountain Jesus had indicated. Jesus arrived first. "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (28:16-17).

The word "doubt" doesn't mean they were unsure if they believed, it means they hesitated (*distazo*), Mt 14.31. The eleven have faith. But they haven't grasped the full meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Perhaps you're unsure too. Does Jesus deserve worship? Perfect obedience?

The journey to mature faith is difficult. Everyone hesitates at times. No one understands everything at once. It takes time. The disciples weren't completely ready. Who is completely ready for anything? But Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the world and make disciples. He commissions us also.

The commission is like a sandwich. Top and bottom, Jesus gives reasons. He has the right to declare this Great Mission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28:18). Jesus already had all authority, but after his resurrection He exercises it in a wider sphere: in heaven and on earth, over humans, angels, all flesh. His reign over the nations begins in earnest. Jesus came to serve; now he will now be served.

Yet he says he enables our service. "I am with you always." He is with us to redeem us (1:23). He is with us to purify us (18:20). And he is with us to the end of the age to disciple the nations (28:20). We aren't alone in our mission.

There is a sport called free diving. Free divers go deep like scuba divers, but they have no gear. How does it work? Instructors teach free divers to breathe differently and to ignore the impulse to breathe. But don't ignore it too long or you'll black out, underwater, in the dark and die. Of course, your instructor goes with you, helps you, all the way to the end, blasting out your air just before you break the surface and take six recovery breaths. So Jesus teaches us, goes with us and authorizes – for his "sport" – making disciples of the nations, without apology.

## **The content of the commission**

The commission says, "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" (28:19-20). The original has just one command: "Make disciples." The rest supports and explains.

The commission is not "Tell people about Jesus" or "Share the gospel." It's not "Grow your church" or "Make converts." The commission goes deeper. To make disciples is to lead believers to *maturity*, so they become leaders and make disciples for the next generation. That's how the church continues decade after decade.

We begin with our people. Jesus came to Israel first; the disciples began with Israel too. Later, Jesus said they must go to the Gentiles (28:19, 10:5,18). The early church had difficulty with this. At first, the apostles stayed close to home or Jerusalem. So the Lord raised Steven, Phillip, and Paul to go to the Gentiles.

We follow the same pattern. It's good to go first to friends and neighbors – although we may even hesitate to do that. If you're nervous about it, pray for someone you care about. Ask the conversation to shift so you can discuss eternal things, or invite them to worship or an event. The moments are there; when we pray, we see them and take them.

## **The means of the commission**

Jesus also tells us how to "make disciples" – by going, by baptizing and by teaching. We can wait for people to come to us, but we also need to go – to share our faith in a way that fits you. If you're worried about what to say, give people a book, a CD, a zip drive or invite them to something. Don't be obnoxious, but give it a thought, then give it a try.

Start with people you know. Many of us are achievers, but broken achievers. What does the gospel say to broken achievers? God says it's good to achieve. God has plans and achieves them. But you can't manage to do everything you would like, can you? Your flaws stop you one day. Fears thwart you another. When things go well, success goes to your head.

We're in the business district. We're near universities, so we are doers, thinkers, searchers. We'll talk to anybody. We're not afraid of atheists or skeptics or men of action. We may not have all the answers, but neither do they.

Not that we talk only to people like ourselves. We start there; it's natural. In time, we go elsewhere, as individuals and as a church. A few people will sense a call to become a missionary – Missions week is Friday to Sunday. Today, we do far more by training and supporting indigenous workers; that's what we do. As a whole the church is missional, here and through the world.

Second, we make disciples by "baptizing them 'into' the name of Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (28:19). This statement shows that the one God exists in three persons – Father, Son, and Spirit. Baptism signifies cleansing, but in terms of mission it means that we disciple people by letting people identify with Jesus, in public, by the act of baptism.

The church is a laundry bag of sinners. We take advantage, start silly conflicts, get divorced, get addicted. The church can be most disappointing, but the church is the one and only organization Jesus

started. And the New Testament never heard of a solo, free-floating Christian. We get baptized, we confess our faith, we say, "Here I stand with these people, warts and all."

Third, we make disciples by "teaching them to obey everything" Jesus commanded. "Everything" is actually two words that fortify the point. We "teach people to obey every last thing" Jesus says. That teaching is found in the gospels, even Matthew. We hear and we heed *every thing*. The parts we love most and least, the easy and the hard, because it's all His word.

Yes, we disobey too often. That's why Jesus came. Still, we try to obey Jesus' commission. What sweep it has: Jesus has all authority. We disciple all nations, we teach all that he commands, and Jesus is with us, all the days. What comfort. As God went with Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, so he goes with us.

Does Jesus ask too much of us? Consider that the man who wrote this down is Matthew, once a despised tax collector. He made mistakes like all the apostles, but by the end he had mastered Jesus' message so he could pass it on to us. Earlier, Jesus called him a man of little faith. Yet he stayed with Jesus and it changed him. The same can happen for us. He died for us, rose for us, and now he tells us that we can and should become his disciple and go make disciples. Maybe someone will say your religion has gotten a bit hot. Yes, but is that so bad, especially if it pleases Jesus, the risen teacher, friend, and Lord.