

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 16, 2019**

**ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:  
THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US (2)**

**Romans 10:9-17**

We're going to talk some more about the Great Commission today. We *need* to talk some more about the Great Commission. But since today is the day we honor our fathers, I want to talk a bit first about Father's Day, fatherhood, and our Heavenly Father.

It will not surprise you, I'm sure, that Father's Day is not as big a deal as Mother's Day. According to the National Retail Federation, 76 percent of Americans are celebrating Father's Day in some way this year, compared with 84 percent who celebrated Mother's Day last month. Total spending for Father's Day is expected to reach an all-time high of \$16 billion this year, compared to \$25 billion for Mother's Day. The average planned spending per person for Mother's Day was \$195, compared to \$139 for Father's Day. What this shows is that while Father's Day may not be quite the big deal that Mother's Day is, it is still a big deal in our culture. Both Mother's Day and Father's Day are big deals, because both mothers and fathers are of inestimable importance to the health and well-being of the family, community, and nation.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees. A few years ago (2014), Mitch Albom, best-selling author of *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, wrote a column in the *Detroit Free Press* entitled "When Did Fathers Become Expendable?" Albom describes an exchange that took place on the TV show, "The View," with its all-female panel and massive female audience. Actor Terry Crews, a guest on the show, was deluged with objections, on both the set and social media, after suggesting that "there are some things only a father can give you." The debate on the show went on for several minutes at high volume, with hosts Whoopi Goldberg and Jenny McCarthy (who is no longer on the show) blasting Crews for his positive view of the role a dad plays in the lives of his children.

It prompted Albom to wonder at "how far we have come, that on network TV, a man suggesting 'there are some things only a father can give you' is greeted not with agreeing nods but with cannon fire. On some levels," he concedes, "we men must blame ourselves. The number of fathers who take no responsibility for parenting ... is despicably high. But what," he asks, "about fathers" who do not abandon their families or their parenting role? What about "the fathers who relish their roles? Is citing their virtues now politically incorrect?"

Albom concludes with this personal analysis: "What does a father bring to the table? I can cite a few things I got from my own: Strength. Quiet confidence. Discipline. Responsibility. And love – all displayed differently than my mother, which was fine. My father also taught us how to be a husband, how to respect a woman, when to lead and when to support.

“It’s true,” he writes, “not all men are like my dad. But plenty are. And fatherhood didn’t suddenly, after thousands of years, lose its value. It may be trendy to dismiss dads as little more than fertilizer, but it’s not true. In fact, it’s pretty foolish. Such is our world, where a comment like Crews’ brings a tsunami” of criticism. “Funny thing is, I remember someone from my childhood frequently saying: ‘He needs his father to do that.’ It was,” says Albom, “my mother.” (Mitch Albom, “When Did Fathers Become Expendable?” *Detroit Free Press*, June 22, 2014.)

Fathers are *not* expendable. The statistical data showing the benefits of having both a mother and a father in the home for the well-being of both the children and the family as a whole is overwhelming. So, let’s not depreciate the value of fathers or the role they play.

When my children look at the cumulative resume of my life, I hope they can say these three things of me:

1. Dad loves Jesus, and he always will.
2. Dad loves Mom, and he always will.
3. Dad loves us, and he always will.

If that is the legacy of my life, perhaps that is enough.

Speaking of a father’s love, a dad in Philadelphia took his three-year-old daughter to a baseball game between the Phillies and our Washington Nationals. Whether it is ever wise to take a three-year-old to a major league baseball game is a question I will leave to you. During the game, a foul ball came right toward them in the upper deck. The dad leaned over the railing and caught it – his first and (so far) only foul ball.

Have you ever caught a foul ball or maybe a home run ball at a major league stadium? For a true baseball fan, it is a dream come true. I’ve actually caught two foul balls in my life – one at old Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh (in 1975) and one at Yankee Stadium in New York (in 1984, the only time I have ever been to Yankee Stadium). I still have at least one of those baseballs.

In his excitement, this dad in Philadelphia handed the ball to his little girl, who immediately threw it back over the railing and down to the lower deck. Everyone gasped. The dad was as shocked as anyone to see her throw the ball away.

What do you do when something like that happens? You’ve been waiting your whole life for this moment, and then, in an instant, your souvenir ball is gone. If you’re a real baseball fan, it might not be easy to show grace in that moment. But, you know what this dad did? Rather than exploding with anger, he did what a loving father should do: He wrapped his arms around his daughter and gave her a tender embrace.

“This,” says Philip Ryken, “is the way God loves us. He puts gifts in our hands that we could never catch for ourselves. Without realizing what we are doing, sometimes, we throw them away. Yet rather than getting irritated with us, He loves us again. Then He gives us the

freedom to go love someone else with the same kind of love. He even gives us the grace to go back to people who throw our love away and love them all over again.” (Philip Ryken, *Loving the Way Jesus Loves*, 58).

Rather than getting irritated or angry with us when we spurn His love or throw away the gifts He gives us, God – our Father in heaven – keeps on loving us.

You may have an earthly dad who loves you well. Or, if he is gone, you may have had a dad who loved you well. On the other hand, it is possible that your dad disappointed you. Maybe your dad wasn't, or isn't, a good dad. I'm truly sorry if that is the case.

Whatever the case, I want you to know that you have a Father in heaven who loves you. And always will. You have a Father in heaven who loves you with an immeasurable, unfailing, never-ending, unconditional love. You have a Father in heaven who looks at you and says: “You are my son (or daughter), whom I love, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). You have a Father in heaven who says that nothing in all creation, not even death itself, will be able to separate you from His undying love for you in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). This is not the whole gospel. But it is an essential part of the good news that God has given us both to believe and to share with others as we seek to carry out the Great Commission in the name and power of Jesus.

This Father's Day, and always, let the truth of your Heavenly Father's love for you comfort and free you to live as a beloved child of God, which is what you are (1 John 3:1). All this is from God (2 Corinthians 5:18). It is all by His grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will.

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## **DISCIPLE-MAKING AND EVANGELISM**

Now, let's talk about the Great Commission. Last Sunday, we talked not only about the conversion of Garrison Johns (if you don't know about Garrison Johns, you'll need to read, watch, or listen to last Sunday's sermon) but also – and more importantly – about the Great Commission as we find it in John 20 (“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you”), Acts 1 (“You shall be my witnesses”), and 2 Corinthians 5 (“We are therefore Christ's ambassadors”), as well as its most familiar form, in Matthew 28, where Jesus says to His followers: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”

The essence of the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is the command to “go and make disciples” (28:19). If disciple-making is the goal of the Great Commission, it is intuitively obvious that there is more to the Great Commission than evangelism alone. There is more to it than just sharing our faith with others. It is (or should be) just as obvious that evangelism is an essential component of the Great Commission. It is indispensable. You cannot be a disciple-maker for Jesus without first sharing the message of the gospel with those you desire to disciple.

In New Testament terms, a disciple (*mathetes* in Greek) is a student or apprentice who attaches him- or herself to a teacher or rabbi in order to follow, learn from, and be trained by the teacher. The goal of the disciple in biblical times was not just to gain knowledge or wisdom, but, in effect, to become like the teacher. This is what Jesus had in mind when He called the original 12 disciples to follow Him, and when He later commissioned them (minus Judas) to go and make disciples of all nations. As Francis Chan says, the whole point of being a disciple of Jesus was to imitate Him, to carry on His ministry in the world, and, in the process, to become like Him (Francis Chan, *Multiply*, 16).

But that is not all. Disciples of Jesus are meant to reproduce spiritually. The first disciples of Jesus were commissioned to go out into the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to “win” others who would become what they themselves were – *disciples of Jesus*. Robert Coleman writes in his masterpiece, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, that the Great Commission Jesus gave to His disciples was “to build” (or train up) “people like themselves who were so constrained” (so compelled) “by the commission of Christ that they not only followed (Him) but led others to follow His way” (Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 101).

So, you see, the essence of the Great Commission is not just evangelism. There is more to it than witnessing to others. More to it, even, than making converts. Getting someone to profess their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord is not the finish line. It is just the starting point in the life of a disciple.

The Great Commission is about making disciples who not only believe the gospel and place their trust in Jesus for salvation, but who follow Jesus joyfully and bear witness in both words and conduct to the amazingness and sufficiency of His grace amid all the ups and downs of life, who seek to live faithfully under His Lordship, who desire to serve His purposes and to live *coram deo* – before the face of God, under His gracious and sovereign rule, and for his glory. The Great Commission is about making disciples who will make more disciples, on and on, until, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:13, “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

That said, it must also be said – again – that evangelism is absolutely essential to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Why? Because you cannot be a true follower of Jesus unless you first know Him and believe in Him as the Son of God and the one and only Savior of sinners. You cannot be a real disciple of Jesus unless you first receive Him as Savior and Lord of your life. You must first hear the gospel and embrace it in faith. Paul explains this with indisputable logic in Romans 10.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is a prerequisite for being a disciple-maker. And believing in Jesus is a prerequisite for both following Him as a disciple and sharing the gospel message with others in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **EVANGELISM DEFINED**

Before we get to Paul's explanation in Romans 10 of how and why evangelism matters, let's pause to think about the meaning of the word *evangelism*. It is a word that terrifies many of us and offends lots of people in our culture today. It comes from the Greek word *evangelion*, which simply means "good news" or "gospel." The message of the gospel is, literally, good news. It is the good news of what God has done through the incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from the punishment we justly deserve because of our wrongdoing, to forgive all our sins, to reconcile us to God, to adopt us as the beloved children of our Heavenly Father, and to give us the gift of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. This good news is not based on anything we have done, or can and must do to merit God's blessings. It is based on what God in His mercy and grace has done for us. From start to finish, it is all pure grace, which, as you have heard it said, comes free of charge to people (like us) who don't deserve it and never will. Which is part of what makes the good news so good. And why you and I should never be reluctant or timid about sharing it.

What is evangelism? The dictionary defines it as "the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness." Not every Christian is called by God to the ministry of preaching, but all of us who believe the gospel – all of us who confess with our mouth that "Jesus is Lord" and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9) – *are called* to spread the gospel through our personal witness in our particular spheres of influence. This means that evangelism is not just for "professional" Christians like preachers or missionaries. It is *the church's commission*. It belongs to the *whole church*. It is *our* commission. *All of us* have a part to play in it. It is something that requires more than just our intellectual support or agreement in principle. It requires our action. We have to do something about it.

Charles Spurgeon (among others) defined evangelism as "one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread." This word-picture highlights the fact that, spiritually speaking, we are all beggars who need the grace that only God can provide. We're no better than anyone else. The only difference between us and people who don't know Jesus in His saving love is that we do know Him. We know where to get the "bread" our souls so desperately need.

So, like Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 55, we can say to others:

"Come, all you who are thirsty,  
                   come to the waters;  
 and you who have no money,  
                   come, but and eat!  
           Come, buy wine and milk  
           without money and without cost.  
 Why spend money on what is not bread  
 and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
 and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."  
 (Isaiah 55:1-2)

We who have tasted the bread and wine and milk of God's grace have the privilege *and* the obligation of inviting others to come and taste and see for themselves that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).

A more technical definition of evangelism comes from Anglican church leader William Temple: "To evangelize," he said, "is so to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men (and women) shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior, and to serve him as their King in the fellowship of His church." (Quoted in Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, 9.)

We need to unpack this definition to understand its full impact. But that will have to wait until another time.

Our friend Ken Priddy, who heads the Great Commission GO Center for church revitalization for the EPC, distinguishes between three vital components of the Great Commission: *Outreach*, *Evangelism*, and *Discipleship*. We'll have to wait until another time to talk about these distinctions as well.

### **PAUL'S CASE FOR THE GREAT COMMISSION**

There is also the Holy Spirit-inspired flow of Paul's logic in Romans 10. Notice the force of this logic in the litany of questions Paul asks in verses 14 and 15, after declaring in verses 12 and 13 that the way of salvation is the same for both Jews and non-Jews – namely, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord" in true, trusting faith "will be saved" (10:13). Verse 13 is a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Joel (Joel 2:32), which Peter also quoted in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:21.

Here is the flow of Paul's case for evangelism and, more broadly, for the Great Commission in verses 14 and 15:

- Salvation is promised to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus in faith (verse 13); but who will ever call on Him if they don't believe in Him?
- How can someone who has never heard of Him and what He did for us ever believe in Him?
- How can people ever hear the gospel message unless someone tells them – unless someone preaches the good news or simply tells them about Jesus and His love?
- How will the message ever get out, how will anyone ever preach the gospel or spread the word about Jesus, unless they are commissioned and sent out in His name?

Calling on the Lord for salvation depends on believing.

Believing depends on knowing about Jesus.

Knowing about Jesus depends on hearing the message of the gospel.

Hearing depends on someone telling the message.

And the telling of the message depends on messengers, witnesses, ambassadors, missionaries, and evangelists – mainly, ordinary Christian men and women, young and old (and in-between); in other words, people like us – being sent out by God. To do what?

- To spread the message of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ for every person who will accept it (and Him) by faith;
- To tell what Jesus has done for us to everyone who will listen;
- To plant the seeds of the gospel and to feed and water those seeds;
- To live lives of love and compassion, so that people we know or encounter will see and experience God’s love not just in our words but in our actions;
- To invite people to trust in Jesus and to join us in the adventure of becoming and making disciples;
- To be disciples who make a difference by making disciples who make a difference.

*This is the Great Commission.* It is the *church’s* commission. It is *our church’s* commission. It is *our* commission, *yours*, and *mine*.

As I said last Sunday, we *must* be a Great Commission church. It is the only way to live up to our calling as beloved children of our Heavenly Father and followers of Jesus our King.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.