



JESUS' LAST WORDS

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Matt 28:16-20;

Acts 1:4-8

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In our culture, and I suspect in most, a person's last words have special significance. I recently read the book *Lonesome Dove*, and later saw the movie. At the end of that story, dying Gus MacRae asked his partner to take his body back to Texas. Texas is a long way from Montana by horse drawn wagon, but Call agreed. Then he did it, much to everyone's disapproval and at considerable cost to himself in time and trouble. He made this rash promise and kept it because it was his friend's dying wish.

Our Savior, Jesus, did not die after his last words, but returned to heaven in bodily form. Two parallel passages give His last recorded words during His time on earth:

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:16-20, NASB)

And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:4-8)

The Matthew passage is set in Galilee, but the events described in Acts take place at the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. So, on these two occasions, Jesus made these declarations of his intent to send out His people into the entire world.

First, let's look at the people to whom the text is addressed. In both cases, the only ones specifically mentioned are the eleven remaining disciples. I think we

can infer that others were present as well, however, since a later passage in Acts speaks of all those that were always with them. Moreover, the command is so large, so extensive, that I conclude it is meant for all believers, or more exactly for the entire church. It would be, for example, humanly impossible for eleven men to physically accomplish such a command.

Let us look now at the specifics of these commands of our Lord. He begins by invoking His authority. In the Matthew passage, it is most clear: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore." His authority extends over the entire spiritual world, over the entire physical world, and over all time: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." His claim is to authority over a totality of space and time!

What is the point of claiming authority in this context? I believe that Jesus is telling us that He, having been granted this authority on earth, wants to be acknowledged worldwide. A king needs subjects (this is not need in the sense of lack, but of definition), and God desires worshipers. I suppose that He could have taken a different approach. He could have appeared Himself all over the world and established His kingdom in a more tangible way. But we see from the entire sweep of the gospels that that was not His approach. He always desired men to come to Him from the heart, and He still does. Furthermore, He has always wanted men to come alongside, to be part of the work.

We know that to be a follower of Jesus, to do all that He commands, is to do more than good works or to live a moral life. I suppose that the Essenes of His time could subscribe to such codes. And many gurus of the past and present have included such ideas in their teaching. No, Jesus called his disciples to something new, not a sect of Judaism, not a new way of living, but a whole new relationship to God, centered in His Son, and empowered by the Spirit. This new relationship, one of forgiveness and grace, rather than keeping a law, is not so easy to explain in a few words or sentences.

That is why, I believe, Jesus commanded His disciples and us, not to make converts, but to make disciples, teaching them to obey all that He commanded. Becoming a disciple is a process. The moment of changing allegiance from self to Jesus might come at various points along the way, but Jesus teaches us, not only here, but also in his ministry, that the goal is making disciples. His disciples made an early commitment to

him, one that was sometimes difficult to meet. Even after three years, we see men who seem to understand dimly and obey inconsistently. And they were with Jesus nearly all the time! We humans are hard to teach. But I want us to remember that Jesus' message has content. These are not merely wise sayings, nor was he building a personality cult. Jesus spoke to men and women truth about their heavenly Father and about Himself. He showed us that we are in desperate need of a savior; and then he went about saving us.

Jesus gave these instructions or commands twice, once in Galilee, and once near Jerusalem. Clearly he intended this to be very important. With an important assignment, we require resources to get the job done. Jesus' words give us three resources to use in completing the task set before us: His authority, His presence, and the Holy Spirit. Going under His authority, we have His passport, his blessing, and His protection all over the earth. Of course, there is another kingdom that doesn't want to yield ground. Thus the necessity and purpose of the Holy Spirit, to do spiritual battles, both against the forces of darkness, but also in our own hearts. Finally, Jesus says that He is with us as long as it takes. He can and does encourage us when we are discouraged. He empowers us and leads us to new victories. With resources like these, His kingdom must be established!

Notice the totality encompassed by Jesus' commands. First, there is the geographic totality, expressed by the phrases "all the nations" and "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." As you may know, the word nations does not refer to political structures, but to ethnic groups, so a "nation" can be very small, located within a country or across one or more borders—like the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Both these phrases let us know that He wants disciples everywhere. There is also a totality of time encompassed in both passages. In Matthew He promises to be with us "always, even to the end of the age." In Acts, the disciples ask about timing, but Jesus says that God the Father alone has that authority, and then goes on with His command. By deliberately avoiding answering the question about time, I think Jesus means His command to be valid over all time from then on.

Let's look further at the specific directions He gave to the disciples (and to us). First, in Acts 1:4-5, he said to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:3 tells us that Jesus appeared in the flesh for forty days after His resurrection. Pentecost is fifty days after Passover, so it would have been only a week after His ascension and the specific command to wait for the Spirit. Then they were to be His witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in all Judea and Samaria—that is in all historical Israel, and finally to the ends of the earth.

I wonder what they understood by the "remotest part of the earth," or as it is in the NIV, "the ends of the earth." And the King James Version gives "the uttermost part of the earth." We get the sense of distance! I

think that few people had any idea of anything beyond the Roman Empire—that is the Mediterranean region, except probably some parts of today's Middle East. However, the ointment nard, or spikenard, is from a plant grown in India. Traders from that far away must have come to Jerusalem and other major centers. My friend Steve tells me that there were some vague legends in the Roman Empire (probably among the well educated) of the peoples south of the African desert and east of India. The province of Britain was considered remotely far north. Today, in Silicon Valley, we may know someone from every continent. By contrast, those listening to Jesus nearly two thousand years ago had no notion of what it would mean to go to the ends of the earth.

Today, the ends of the earth, or the remotest part, is only partially geographically remote; the remoteness now is more cultural, linguistic, and political or religious. These are places that are hard to get to in more ways than one, but I think that has always been the case. The remotest part of the earth, in the sense of distance from the gospel, is now found in a band of countries from north Africa across south Asia and through southeast Asia, often described as the 10/40 window. This region encompasses most of the ethnic groups yet to have a witness of Jesus Christ. It also contains many of the poorest peoples in the world. The need there is great. It's a difficult place to go, but remember Jesus promises His resources.

Do you suppose that these two commands were a surprise to the disciples or any of the others that may have heard them? They should not have been a surprise. Scripture is clear that the Messiah was to be for all peoples. For example, in Isaiah 9 and Micah 5, the One who is coming is clearly for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And Jesus himself ministered to at least five Gentiles, a number that seems to be somewhat disproportionate to the primarily Jewish population in Galilee and Jerusalem. But I sense in the early accounts in Acts of the growing church that there was very little outreach outside the Jewish community.

My case for making this assertion is that there is no mention of any activity outside Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings until persecution hit, described in Acts 8. Acts 8:4 is very significant: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (NIV). The next verse describes Philip's journey to Samaria and then to the deserts of Judea to meet the Ethiopian eunuch. So part of Jesus' commands was fulfilled by Philip. Later, in Acts 10, Peter preached to Cornelius the Roman centurion. And of course, in the remainder of Acts Paul travels over much of the Roman Empire, in a partial fulfillment of Jesus' commands. These examples of evangelism across cultural and geographic borders—missions—were orchestrated by God to accomplish His will for the church. By the time of Constantine in the early 300's, most of the Roman world was pretty well evangelized. By that I mean that the witness of

Christ had reached them. What about after that? Let me just say that from a human perspective, it seems to me that Christians did not do a great job of making disciples among all the nations. But I do believe that God is in charge of His enterprise, so that perhaps God has delayed his program of sending to the ends of the earth, so that we can be part of it!

I want now to turn our attention to today, to our response to Jesus' commandments. While the commands are for the entire church, not every person can physically go to the ends of the earth. Some are unable, some have been called to ministry here, some are unwilling. But all can be involved in the process. All of us must be involved, because Jesus has commanded that we do so. For one thing, we can become better informed. I highly recommend the Perspectives class that is offered at various churches around the South Bay area, usually twice a year. These classes are a great opportunity to learn what God has done and is doing now to spread His witness around the globe.

This involvement has been compared to an army. For every soldier on the front lines, ten are required in support roles. And for every man or woman in uniform, many civilians are required to equip them, feed them, and pay them. We see a similar structure in the mission field. For every church planter or evangelist sent out there are many needed in support roles. Some are translators, and still others are office workers. In fact, when we look at all our PBC Cupertino missionaries, most of them are in support roles. Then we have most of us, who are the "civilians" needed to provide the resources for these endeavors. These support roles are not insignificant in spreading the gospel. Remember Philip who was a table server before he went to Samaria and the southern desert. I have received an e-mail from just such a person. One of the young men from our body is now in Malawi as a mission school teacher for the third grade. Listen to what he wrote just two weeks ago. This is titled "Awesome News from Malawi":

Today I spoke with several students and one of them, Kun Hee Lim, decided to accept Jesus Christ into his heart as Lord and Savior. What a joyous and incredible occasion! I was ecstatic! Coming over here I never thought I would have as direct an influence on someone's relationship with God as I did today. The icing on the cake is that I had never before led anyone to Jesus. "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:14). After riding through some of the ups and downs of teaching here in Malawi I can be sure that God brought me here for at least one purpose: to be present when the Holy Spirit moved a little one to salvation. I am thankful to God for giving me the courage to ask the one question I have always been too timid to ask anyone else.

Worldwide, though, about 90% of the mission effort is directed in places and peoples where the gospel is already available. Of course, in many of these places, discipleship is still desperately needed; and it is appropriate for that activity to continue. But the Church has yet to fulfill Jesus' command to go to the remotest part of the earth. I want to challenge you this morning to consider how you might be involved in mission activity in the ten-forty window. It is certainly difficult to do so. I have been involved in some short-term mission trips (twice to Mexicali and twice to Guatemala), but there I could use my faltering Spanish, the culture is welcoming, and there is a church context in which to work. Going anyplace in the ten-forty window is a daunting proposition for any of us. But Christ is calling some of us to go there and be His witnesses. He is calling all of us to pray for these peoples, and to support those who do go. And He has promised to be with us. He has promised the Holy Spirit. And those who go, go with His authority.

We do not have a "missions budget" or even a missions strategy here at PBCC. Rather, the philosophy of the elders is that mission support should be based on relationships. We expect members of our body to come alongside various of our missionaries (and perhaps others) to pray for them, encourage them, communicate with them, and support them financially. David Jones, our Missions Minister, is setting up "sending teams" to do this in a more tangible and consistent way. The concept of support, then, is organic, based on what God leads individuals in the congregation to do, not on a formula imposed by church leadership. We depend on God's leading, both individually and corporately.

In recent years we have established a committee of individuals committed to missions activities in our church body; this committee is known as the Missions Council. Its members are chosen by the committee as various individuals make their interests known, and the proposed members are submitted to the Board of Elders for approval. The role of the Missions Council is to advise the Board of Elders on Missions Policies and on the selection and evaluation of missionaries. A current project of the Missions Council is a new display and information bulletin board at the back of the auditorium that is already under construction, but not yet completed. I urge you this morning to pray about how you might be more involved in Jesus' great commission, to bear witness of Him to the remotest part of the earth. You could start by contacting one of the Missions Council members, or David Jones, or myself to get on even one missionary's prayer letter. Much more is possible, and I trust that the Holy Spirit will be convicting some of you to go, more of you to give, and everyone to pray.

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