

April 19, 2009
He's Got the Whole World in His Hands
Matthew 28:18-20

"Jesus came to his disciples 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.'"

We may have heard these words quite often. Try to read carefully what Jesus said. Not, perhaps, what we think He said.

1. What does He say/not say about Himself?

a. All authority (20:18)

What Jesus doesn't say: 'I'm off in heaven, waiting for you to come, one day, someday, in the future - in the meantime, do the best you can.' Sometimes we think Jesus has gone away; He's enjoying heaven; after death we'll be there, too; until then, we're pretty much on our own.

But Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth now; He is active in the world and the reality of life - now! In the study guide we have been reading Colossians: *"He is (present tense) the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation ... He is (present tense) before all things, and in him all things hold together (present tense). And he is (present tense) the head of the body, the church; he is (present tense) the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy"*(1:15-18). The basis on which Jesus commands us with the great commission is the authority that he holds. He is the ultimate authority in the world - yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

What does this mean? We are not left on our own! We live in a world where *"God is God, Jesus is Lord, the powers of evil have been defeated, God's new world has begun."*¹ When we take His message, we are ambassadors for Christ. We live, move, and have our being in His name. We act on His authority. We are not alone. To emphasize this, Jesus says (literally), *"I am with you ...*

b. At all times (20:20)

What Jesus doesn't say: 'My presence comes and goes - if you're good I'm close to you; if you're naughty, I'll leave you' or 'I like to tease you: sometimes I'll be close but sometimes I'll be far away - just to mess with your mind.'

Jesus gives us a basic, fundamental promise: He is with us. The One who was abandoned by the

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 227

Father on the cross, affirms that He will never do that to us, for He knows at first hand what that is like.

What does this mean? If you *feel*/like you are alone, that God has abandoned you, that you have no help or no hope ... that is just a feeling! It is *not* truth! It is *not* reality. Our emotions and feelings are notoriously tricky things - they can mislead us quite regularly. Following my emotions is a lot like trying to find my way in a completely dark room - I can get completely turned around! I can get confused. I can be led astray.

Jesus wants us to know - absolutely, unequivocally, and objectively - that we are NEVER alone. The familiar reflection "Footprints" is very true at this point: *"One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord, 'You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?' The Lord replied, 'The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.'"*²

2. What does Jesus say/not say about us?

a. He tells us to "go" into the world ... to all nations

Jesus does not say that being a Christian is just about a private, personal relationship you have with Jesus, like you might have with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Jesus does not say, "It's just about you and your personal relationship with Jesus." He does not say, 'Keep yourself in a safe Christian community, where you don't have to deal with people of other faiths or with no religious background.

In fact, Jesus tells us that our faith changes the way we live in the world. The Kingdom of God has come among us (Mark 1:14-15). We pray, *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ..."* (Matthew 6). Jesus challenges us to live as people of the Kingdom now, today, where we live. Yes - there is a future component to this - one day we will experience the fullness of life with Jesus. But living with and for Jesus begins the moment we choose to invite Him to be Lord of our lives. It affects how I live, this day, tomorrow, and the day after that.

We now know that the world is a lot bigger than a first-century Jew thought. Their world was basically themselves: anyone who wasn't Jewish was of lesser value (children of a lesser God). They referred to non-Jews as "gentile dogs." In Christ, there is no Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:28). This good news is for everyone. There are no alternative routes to the Father (John

² There are at least 3 versions of this reflection; this is the oldest known version by Mary Stevenson (1936).

14:6) - Jesus is the only way, truth, and source of life - so everyone needs to hear it.

These days, our missionaries take the good news all over the world. Who are the "other" nations who do not hear about Jesus ... or do not hear it clearly? What people in our own country do we tend to avoid?

Jesus does not say that the forces of evil are so strong, this world is going to hell in a hand basket anyway. Let the devil have a good time in this world - the sooner it's destroyed the better. He does not say, "Just say 'no' to this good world, which God has made.

This truth also suggests that God cares about this world - people, yes. But also bigger issues like justice, stewardship of creation, economic fairness, political systems with integrity. He calls us to be people who do our best to live by kingdom principles and values ourselves - and to work actively to see those come to pass in our nation and around the world.

b. He tells us to make disciples ... teaching them all things

Jesus does not say, "Just believe" and you're in. Then go on living like always!" In fact, Jesus has a purpose for our lives. We are called to be His ambassadors - in our homes, workplaces, neighbourhoods, schools, etc - through how we live, act, talk, etc., etc. We all have a story to share. And we have a calling to live a life of love, compassion, service, and holiness. Mission and outreach is an approach to life and lifestyle, recognizing and taking advantage of the "missional" moments along the way - as much, or more, than a programme.

Jesus does not say, "Go and make converts ..." Jesus calls us to make "disciples" - followers, apprentices, students - of Jesus. A disciple is different from a convert. A disciple walks with his master/teacher/mentor each moment or each day, learning from him how to live this life.

Jesus invites us to be disciples: being a Christian is not a matter of simply signing a card, going forward at a rally, or praying a particular prayer so-you-go-to-heaven-when-you-die. Following Jesus means just that - following Jesus.

It's easy to pick and choose from the things Jesus commanded. Some of it is exceptionally difficult. In Christ, we are "free" of all these Old Testament laws, aren't we? Yes, we are free of the legalisms - we do not earn our "ticket to heaven" (if there were such a thing) by keeping rules and regulations. But that doesn't mean we can just go with what we like. Jesus expects each one of us to follow Him - to be holy, to be honest, to have integrity, to be pure, to live by the principles of godly love. In short, He expects us to keep His principles, because they are the principles of the Kingdom of God. We keep them because we love our Lord - we want to please Him, we want to honour Him, we respect His wisdom for full, satisfying, purposeful lives.

Often the people who are most outspoken about "not being under the law" say this as an excuse to do whatever they want to do. They use it as license to live contrary to God's principles. The reason Jesus sets us free from the legalisms of the Old Testament is not so we are free to do

anything at all - but so we are free to live holy, righteous, godly lives because we desire - first and foremost - to please the One we love above all: our God (Father, Son, and Spirit).

If we believe that *"God is God, Jesus is Lord, the powers of evil have been defeated, God's new world has begun"* then we live differently in response. We allow Him to turn over tables of our lives and reshape our priorities. We accept the fact that He know best how to live life - and we choose to live by His ethics and His principles.

c. Baptizing them

I don't think Jesus is really talking about getting people wet for the sake of getting people wet! I don't think He is saying that baptism is essential for salvation. Baptism is a symbol - an outward symbol of an inward reality - the reality of a heart, a soul, a life given to Jesus. The metaphor Paul uses comes directly out of Easter:

Our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him ... You should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.

"When we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace." (Romans 6:3-14)

Baptism is a matter of the heart, soul, mind and will - it's a choice about who is Lord of my life - that is the challenge we all need to wrestle with.

Jesus invites us to be His kingdom people - today (and tomorrow). He invites us to live His kingdom - today (and tomorrow). He challenges us to go to all people with the good news that *"God is God, Jesus is Lord, the powers of evil have been defeated, God's new world has begun."*

The kingdom - the party - has begun. Who can we encourage with the good news?

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