

Therefore . . . bear fruit

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-part series

September 17 & 18, 2016

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Matthew 5:14–16 (CEB)

¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 28:16–20 (CEB)

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth.

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, ²⁰teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Romans 7:1–6 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, I'm talking to you as people who know the Law. Don't you know that the Law has power over someone only as long as he or she lives? ²A married woman is united with her husband under the Law while he is alive. But if her husband dies, she is released from the Law concerning her husband. ³So then, if she lives with another man while her husband is alive, she's committing adultery. But if her husband dies, she's free from the Law, so she won't be committing adultery if she marries someone else. ⁴**Therefore**, my brothers and sisters, you also died with respect to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you could be united with someone else. You are united with the one who was raised from the dead so that we can bear fruit for God. ⁵When we were self-centered, the sinful passions aroused through the Law were at work in all the parts of our body, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But now we have been released from the Law. We have died with respect to the thing that controlled us, so that we can be slaves in the new life under the Spirit, not in the old life under the written Law.

By God's grace, we have been united with Christ. But to what end? Why?

Summons is a bit of a harsh word. It seems rather demanding. The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary says "*summon* implies the exercise of authority." I guess that is the rub. But it is also the point. Jesus does summon us, his disciples, with all the authority of a Lord and Master. Take a close look above at the well-known passage from Matthew 28.

It is a summons, not a request. Jesus is not asking nicely; he is not asking at all. Further, this is not a summons of a few or only of the ordained or only of those who work for a church . . . it is a summons of all those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Plainly put, we cannot claim to be disciples of the Christ and ignore the summons.

To what are we summoned? The heart of this summons can be found right here, in what we call the Great Commission from Matthew 28. Jesus summons us to be his helpers. We, his disciples, are to go out into the world and make more disciples, baptizing and teaching. Sometimes "mission statements" can get pretty long and abstract. Ours is neither. We are to make disciples. Indeed, the stated mission of the UMC is exactly that: "to make disciples for Jesus Christ." In the New Testament, "disciple" translates the Greek word, *mathete*, which connotes a master and pupil relationship. A disciple, a *mathete*, is an apprentice or student, more than merely a

follower or fan. The *mathete* seeks to learn from and emulate the Master. In the Great Commission, the Master summons his disciples to help in the Master's work.

It isn't hard to understand why we might think that Jesus is speaking to someone other than to us. He says we are to make disciples by *baptizing* and *teaching* (v. 19 & 20). I've certainly never baptized anyone and, in all likelihood, neither have you. But it would be a profound mistake here to think that Jesus is speaking only to Robert or Arthur or Pam or any other ordained clergy.

Baptism signifies our entrance into the body of Christ. Robert may be the one who lays on hands, but all of us are summoned by Jesus to do all we can to build up the community of God's people. It is we who invite. It is we who welcome. It is we who promote harmony and unity in the body. We are not spectators at the baptisms on Sunday mornings, we are participants. This is the whole point of the baptismal response: "Now it is our joy to welcome." When Jesus tells his disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" it is a summons meant for us all.

Teaching

Jesus' summons to teach may seem more straightforward than his summons to baptize, but even here we can get off track. We can fail to grasp that we teach others in everything we say and do. The teaching Jesus speaks of is far more than the teaching that goes on in a classroom, as important as that is. If others are going to learn the faith-obedience of a disciple, it is going to be through us, through Jesus' helpers . . . through you and me, just as we learn from each other.

Imagine a person who enters our faith community with no prior understanding of Jesus or of our faith, or worse, someone who thinks they understand, but do not. If they are to begin learning what it truly means to be a disciple, they are going to learn it through us . . . and we will learn through them. Yes, thankfully, God's Holy Spirit leads and guides us all in this. But still, God wants to work with us, not in spite of us nor without us. We are so used to needing Jesus that we can fail to see Jesus' own "Help Wanted" sign.

Reaching Out

To reiterate, a command both simple and direct: Jesus tells his disciples to go to "all nations," – yes, everyone, everywhere – making disciples of Jesus, baptizing them, and teaching them the path to obedience. The Christian church has always understood this commission to be our own; and it is not limited to the New Testament. Israel understood that they were the people of God, chosen by God to be his agents, to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom the whole world would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:1-3, Isaiah 2:2-4, and Isaiah 42:6 for example).

We know we are to be the light to the world but we are often unsure as to how to go about it. Sometimes we think it means we have to pull people out of their homes or stand on street corners passing out tracts. Sure, we ought to invite our neighbors to church with us and share the Good News with strangers, but the biblical understanding of reaching out, of being the light to the world, extends to every part of our lives. We reach when we worship, when we learn, when we love, when we care, when we serve, when we work, when we play – every part of our life is to be a reaching out and a witness to others.

Let me give you one example. We often don't think of our own worship as an act of evangelism or reaching out. But, when a person who is not a churchgoer visits our worship service, they are looking for three things. They want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the Christian church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. Finally, they want to see the relevance of the faith

for their lives.¹ Every Sunday, each of us, as a member of the St. Andrew community, is an important witness to the reality of Christ's love and invitation to all persons. Just as sports heroes are unavoidably role models for our youth, we are always, at all times and in all places, witnesses to the living reality and glory of Christ's sacrificial love.

Peter understood this when he wrote to Christians suffering for their faith, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles² to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (1 Peter 2:11-12). Paul understood this when he wrote to the troubled church in Corinth, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Paul calls us to imitate Christ in all we do so that the glory of God will be visible to all and that all will be saved.

Again . . . what does it mean to be the light to the world? It means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God's kingdom, we live in the "bright interval"³ between Easter and the final, great consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the "new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1) The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days but in the first days of a new age. We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine for all to see, drawing them into the community of God's servant people!!

Free to bear fruit

Sadly, we make this work of making disciples, of bearing fruit, of being the light to the world, much harder than it should be. We burden ourselves with so much. As a boy, I remember thinking that Christianity seemed largely about a long list of stuff we weren't supposed to do. I don't remember much that seemed like Good News. But, of course, this was all wrong. The Good News is not about rule-making, but about freedom from our bondage to sin and, yes, to the Law and all such rule-making.

This is Paul's point in today's passage from his letter to the Romans. We have died to the Law and been raised with Christ, raised to freedom. Elsewhere, Paul analogizes the Law to a nanny. Nannies have their place, but here's the question. Would you want one now . . . for yourself? Would you want someone who gave you a list of do's and don'ts and then enforced them? Someone who controlled your schedule? Someone who, well, treated you like a child?

Of course not, and that is Paul's precise point about the Jewish law in his letter to the Galatians. The Law, with its long lists of rules was never a bad thing, but now, in Christ, its time has passed. The Law was good but its function was as a disciplinarian, a Super Nanny. And now, in Christ, we have outgrown the need for a nanny, super or not, for we have Christ. We have 'grown up' in Christ and are, hence, free with no use for a nanny of any kind.

Here is a portion of Paul's letter, as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson (Galatians 3:23-27):

Until the time when we were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, we were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic law. The

¹ This is from the survey and focus group research of George Barna.

² For more on the "alien" status of Christians, see *Resident Aliens*, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 1989, Abingdon Press. They offer a challenging vision of what it means to be a Christian community.

³ from N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Jesus*. 1999. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press

law was like those Greek tutors [the nannies], with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for.

But now you have arrived at your destination: By faith in Christ you are in direct relationship with God. Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe—Christ’s life, the fulfillment of God’s original promise.

I find Paul’s metaphor to be very helpful in making some sense of the Old Testament Law. It was given by God for a purpose, a good purpose, but now, God’s people have outgrown it by putting on the “adult faith wardrobe.” We are Christ’s heirs and ready to receive our full inheritance. We are no longer minors and we no longer need a nanny. Thus, we do not need to see the Law’s instructions as a bunch of rules but, rather, as the concrete expression of what it means to love a holy God and what it means to love our neighbor, including those who seem impossible to love.

So . . . goodbye to the nanny and hello to adult freedom, even as we remember all the good teaching that we received from the nanny.

The problem is that freedom is actually a pretty scary idea for many when it is put into practice. We are tempted by the notion of going back to rules because we think there is comfort and certainty there. Haven’t we all sometimes felt like we simply wanted to be told what to do and not do? I couldn’t count the number of people who tell me they wished the Bible simply spelled it all out in black-and-white. Countless tyrannies have arisen across the span of history precisely because the people were ready to follow a strong, decisive, albeit controlling leader. Along with freedom come big words like responsibility, accountability, and consequences.

But we are adults and we are free in Christ. There can be no turning back. Thus, we turn from the nanny called the Law to the freedom that is Jesus.

And in this freedom, we embrace the transformation that enables us to bear fruit (Romans 7:40) for God, to make disciples, to be the light to the world. To be the people and, yes, the St. Andrew that God wants us to be, indeed, summons us to be.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus with a “Help Wanted” sign. That is quite a mental image. We are used to speaking of our need for Jesus, but we don’t very often speak of Jesus’ need for us. But if the work of God’s kingdom is going to move forward, it is going to be through us, as we are strengthened and led by God’s Spirit. But Jesus is not simply *asking* for help, he is *summoning* us to go out into the world and make disciples of Jesus Christ. You might begin by discussing what you think it means to “make disciples for Jesus Christ.”
2. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile” (Romans 1:16). John Wesley was never afraid of making others angry with him – for what he said, whom he said it to, or what he did. Wesley took the Gospel to the poorest, the neediest, and the outcasts of polite society. Late in his life, Wesley worried that he had become respectable! In contrast, many of us can hardly make ourselves say the “J” word in public, say grace in a restaurant, or even invite a friend to church with us. Why are we so timid? Are we afraid of offending or seeming “intolerant?” Are we embarrassed? Are we afraid of being made outcasts? Are we afraid that we are too ignorant about our faith to answer the most basic questions that might be posed to us?
3. Paul fights among the Galatians against the powerful temptation to fall back on rigid legalistic systems of morality and law – on nannies of one sort or another. Who hasn’t felt from time to time that life would be much easier if someone, even God, just told us what to do and not do – specifically! Certainly, many Christians have tried mightily to turn the Bible into a book of such do’s and don’ts. But, of course, the Bible isn’t such a book at all. What are some legalistic systems, some nannies, that tempt us today?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Isaiah 42:5-6 & 49:6 Israel (the people of God) is to be the light to the world.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 10 Jesus sends out his twelve disciples (apprentices) as apostles (messengers).</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 8:34-9:1 The summons to bear fruit has a cost.</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 10 The conversion of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion; God, through Peter, has reached out to the Gentiles, bringing them into the family of God</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Timothy 6:2b-10 The dangers of false teaching and the fruitless path</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

