

THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS **(Matthew 28:16-20)**

In the United States, we commonly have a graduation ceremony for students when they compete kindergarten, 8th grade, high school, college, and graduate school.

I don't think the school I attended had a graduation for kindergarten students, but I do remember a graduation ceremony for 8th grade. It was more of an awards ceremony because we didn't wear caps and gowns. On that occasion, I received a pin for being the #1 language arts student at Herbert Hoover Middle School. I was proud of receiving that pin and kept it for years. Today, I have no earthly idea where that pin is. It is probably in a landfill somewhere.

Beyond 8th grade, I went on to wear a cap and gown four times—high school, college, upon earning a master's degree, and finally for a doctorate. Except for college, I can't recall who spoke or what they said at any of the other graduations.

Generally speaking, most graduations are rather boring affairs, and the longer the ceremony the more boring it is. This week, I used the internet to find some of the best comments made by the speaker at graduation ceremonies:

Robert Orben:

A graduation ceremony is an event where the commencement speaker tells thousands of students dressed in identical caps and gowns that “individuality” is the key to success.

Ellen DeGeneres:

Follow your passion, stay true to yourself, never follow someone else's path unless you're in the woods and you're lost and you see a path then by all means you should follow that.

Mark A. Cooper:

Life has no remote. Get up and change it yourself.

Russell Baker:

The best advice I can give anybody about going out into the world is this: Don't do it. I have been out there. It is a mess.

Melanie White:

Now that you've graduated, just remember: Bosses don't usually accept notes from your mother.

An Anonymous Person:

Congratulations on getting through the easiest part of life.

Gary Bolding:

Your families are extremely proud of you. You can't imagine the sense of relief they are experiencing. This would be a most opportune time to ask for money.

Lin-Manuel Miranda:

My dear, terrified graduates, you are about to enter the most uncertain and thrilling period of your lives.

As we come to the last five verses of Matthew's gospel, it seems to me that Jesus' disciples are ready to graduate. Their course of formal instruction is complete. Their time with their Rabbi has come to an end. They are about to enter the most uncertain and thrilling period of their lives.

In America, we often call graduation exercises by another name. We call it *commencement*. That may sound a bit odd because the root word of *commencement* is *commence*. It means "to begin" or "to start." The kickoff for today's Super Bowl is set for 5:30. That is when the game will commence.

People usually think of graduation as an ending—an end to doing math homework or writing essays or reading history books. It is also an end to seeing your friends every day, and if you are homeschooled, it is an end to spending the morning in your P.J.'s, but I don't know any who might do that. For some it is an end to playing organized sports. It is usually seen as the end of childhood.

I like the word *commencement* because for 18 years or 22 years, you have been raised by your parents, taught by your teachers, shaped by the events you have encountered, and now it is time to go out and become a contributing member of society. It is time to enter that overly hyped phase of life we call *adulthood*.

For Jesus' disciples, it was time to own the mission Jesus had for them. Just like in our graduations, there was someone who delivered a commencement address to those disciples. That someone was Jesus. We call His address, "the Great Commission." Let's look at Matthew 28:16-20. I want you to notice three things.

The Commencement Address Comes from the One Who Has All Authority

Jesus made an audacious claim in v. 18. While Jesus had lived for 33 years in the Roman Empire, He claimed that His authority exceeded that of the Roman Emperor, the Caesar. His authority was greater than any magistrate, whether civil or ecclesiastical.

That was true then, and it is true today. That means there is no person or body that can overrule Jesus. Jesus has veto power over kings, presidents, prime ministers, the United Nations, religious denominations (including the Southern Baptist Convention), as well as the pope and the Vatican.

Jesus doesn't ask for permission or for a vote of approval. He only seeks compliance to His will because He is God, and we are not. He has all authority, not some, not a little, not even a lot; He has it all. Any authority we have is on loan, and one day we will have to give an account to Him for how we used the authority He entrusted to us.

Verses 16-17 tells us how to respond to the One who has all authority. First, we go wherever He directs us. Last week we looked at how the women who went to Jesus' tomb were given an assignment by Jesus. They were to tell His disciples that He was alive, and they were to meet Him in Galilee. This announcement was really a reminder. Back in Matthew 26:31, Jesus had told the disciples, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

In obedience to Jesus' command, they go to Galilee. Specifically, they went to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. Mountains are generally big places. How did the disciples know where to find Jesus? Maybe they had a pre-arranged place to meet. I prefer, however, to think that they didn't know where to find Him, but they trusted that He knew how to find them. They went to Galilee and to the place Jesus had pointed out, just as He told them, and sure enough Jesus found them.

Likewise, when you obey Jesus, He knows where you are, and He will show up.

The second thing they did is they worshipped this One with all authority. They bowed before Him. They honored Him. That is always the right thing to do. Worship, however, is a supplement to obedience; it is not a replacement for obedience. Worship minus obedience is not really worship.

We are told something interesting in v. 17. Matthew reports, "but some doubted." I think something is going on that Matthew didn't report. Last Sunday, during the Scripture Reading, I read from 1 Corinthians 15. One of the verses I read was v. 6 in which Paul tells us, "Then He appeared to more than 500 brothers at the same time." None of the gospel accounts tell us of that. I think it happened right there on that mountain in Galilee. It was not any of the 11 apostles who doubted. By this time, they were convinced that Jesus was alive. It was some of the 500 who were unsure. The word translated here as doubted is used only two times in the NT, both by Matthew. Literally, it means "to stand in two ways." It conveys the idea of uncertainty.

Last week, I said, "The best thing you can do for your own spiritual growth and strength is to become convinced of the reality that Jesus rose from the dead, that He is alive today." When you become convinced of that, you will obey Him, and you will worship Him.

There is a chorus I grew up singing in church and at youth meetings. For years I thought I was just a chorus. Some years later, I learned there are verses also. It is in our hymnal, and we would do well to learn it and sing it. It is hymn #105. Let me read to you the third verse and chorus:

Satan's forces crumbled like a mighty wall,
The stone that held Him in was rolled aside.
The Prince of Life in glory was lifted over all,
Now earth and heaven echo with the cry.

He is Lord, He is Lord!
He is risen from the dead and He is Lord!
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord.

The Commencement Address Comes to the Ones Who Have Jesus' Presence

Jesus bracketed the Great Commission, which we will look at in moment, between a bold claim and an even more incredible promise. The basis of Jesus' commission of us is that He has all authority. The completeness of His authority is what gives Him the right to commission us.

Our ability to live out that commission is founded upon the promise He makes in the last line of v. 20. "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." It is the abiding presence of Jesus that qualifies us to represent Him to our world.

Let's be clear as to whom Jesus was speaking. Look at the beginning of v. 18. We know the 11 were there. I believe that it wasn't just the 11 but that the 500 brothers were also there. Paul could have called them *brothers* in the sense that they were Jews, but I think He called them brothers because they were also followers of Jesus. They believed He was the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. They were committed to following Jesus.

We—the followers of Jesus—we are the ones who have the presence of Jesus. He is present within us, and He is present among us by means of the Holy Spirit.

Do you ever feel alone? Do you ever feel that no one understands you, that no one is in your corner? Loneliness is rampant in our culture. It is possible to feel lonely in a crowd of people. You can live in an apartment complex with people living below you, above you, and beside you, and yet you feel profoundly alone. No one talks to you. No one calls you. No one checks on you. That is hard. That hurts.

While that loneliness seems all too real, I want you to know that actually, loneliness is an illusion, and it is a lie from the enemy of your souls. The reality is that if you are a follower of Jesus, He is right there with you. He is by your side. If you think you are alone, either He lied or you are mistaken. Which do you think it is?

One of the great stories of the OT is the one where Jacob is, basically, running away from home. He used subterfuge and trickery to steal the blessing of his father, which should have rightly gone to his brother Esau. Esau is not a happy camper. He consoles himself with the idea of killing Jacob. Jacob gets out of Dodge. On his journey, he lies down, goes to sleep and has a dream in which the angels of God are ascending and descending on a ladder that reaches to heaven. The LORD stands above the ladder and speaks to Jacob. He says, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." He adds, "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15). In the very next verse, we read: "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.'"

I submit to you, more often than not, we are like Jacob. The Lord is right here where we are in the struggles and difficulties of life. He is also here in the joys and blessings of life, but we are unaware and oblivious to His presence. With His help, we need to live our lives with the certain knowledge that He is present, and we can draw upon His strength, and wisdom, and guidance, and protection, and help.

The Commencement Address Comes As the Call to Make Jesus Followers

Let's look at vv. 19-20a. In our English translation, it appears that v. 19 begins with a command telling us to "go." The NT, however, was written in Greek, not in English, and in the Greek text, we find that the Great Commission has only one verb, but it has three participles. The one verb is *make disciples*, and the participles are *going*, *baptizing*, and *teaching*. We are to make disciples as we are going through life, and we make disciples by baptizing them and teaching them.

Jesus was very clear that His goal for His people is that we make disciples. He didn't command us to get people to join our church. He didn't command us to get people saved. His goal is not that we do things that will make people think fondly of us. He said, "Make disciples."

It occurs to me that you cannot make someone something that you are not. I can't make you into a dancer because I can't dance. I can't make you into an ice skater because I have never put on a pair of ice skates, not a single time.

Given enough time, and if you had the interest, I could make you into a golfer. You may not become a great golfer, but I can teach you how to swing a golf club. I can teach you how to swing a golf club because I have been doing that for a long, long time. I have read articles, books, and watched videos on how to swing a club. I was on the golf team in high school and college. I can teach you to golf.

I can teach you to play certain card games, the games I know how to play. I can't teach you, however, to play Bridge because I have never played it. I have heard about it. I have overheard my parents talk about it because they would go to friend's houses and play Bridge. Since I don't know the first thing about that card game, I can't make you a Bridge player.

Let me ask you, can you make a Jesus follower? You can and you will if you follow Jesus yourself. Make no mistake, you can't and you won't if you don't—if you don't follow Him yourself.

Let me make a few random comments about this thing we call the Great Commission. In a sense, it is structured around the word *all*. *All* is used four times. Jesus has **all authority**. We are to make disciples of **all nations**. We are to teach them to observe **all that Jesus has commanded us**. Jesus is with us **always**, even to the end of time.

We have talked about Jesus having all authority and Him being with us always. Let's take a moment to consider the other two. When Jesus tells His followers to make follower of all nations, He is changing the game plan. When Jesus first sent out the Twelve, He charged them in Matthew 10:6, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles . . . but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Initially, His mission was for Jews to reach Jews. When Jesus died, however, He didn't die for just Jews. When He arose, He did not arise for just Jews. He died and rose to ransom people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9). His plan is for us to preach that gospel across this world and make Jesus followers among all peoples.

Jesus' plan is for disciples to make disciples who will make disciples who will make disciples and on and on. The genius of His plan is the power of multiplication.

Most churches, and this is one of them, rely on addition. Every so often, we add a person here and a person here. Unfortunately, over the years, we have had more subtractions than we have had additions. What is even worse is that most of our subtractions have been due to division. When we let Satan divide us, the result is subtraction. We need to forget about adding and subtracting and do everything we can to prevent division. And that will be the case if we focus our energy on multiplication.

We see an example of discipleship and multiplication in 2 Timothy 2:2. Paul wrote to Timothy, “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” In that one verse we find four generations of disciples—Paul, Timothy, faithful men, and others also.

In his book, *Disciples Are Made Not Born*, Walter Henrichsen gave the following illustration. He told about a display that was seen at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. The display was a checkerboard with 1 grain of wheat on the first square. On the second square there were 2 grains of wheat, with 4 on the 3rd, 8 on the 4th, 16 on the 5th, 32 on the 6th, 64 on the 7th, 128 on the 8th, and so on. Down the board, at some point, the grains of wheat were spilling over into neighboring squares. The demonstration stopped at that point. Above the checkerboard was this question: “At this rate of doubling every square, how much grain would you have on the checkerboard by the time you reached the 64th square?” Those curious enough to know the answer could punch a little button, and the answer would flash on a screen above the board. By the time you reached the last square, you would have enough grain “to cover the entire subcontinent of India 50 feet deep.”

That is the secret of multiplication, and that is Jesus’ strategy to reach the world. We will never do it by addition. We can do it by multiplication. If you would reach one person for Christ in 2021 and help that person become a true Christ-follower, and then if we and they all reached another person in 2022, and we kept that going, just imagine what God could do in this church and in Enid, Oklahoma. And if all God’s people did that, we could reach the world in just a few years.

The other **all** I wanted to expound on is found at the very beginning of v. 20. Notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say we are to teach them everything there is to know about the Bible. He didn’t even say we are to teach them to know everything that we know. He said, “Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” To observe is much different than to know. We routinely teach people to know information or facts. That is not what changes people’s lives. To observe is to do. We are to teach people to do what Christ followers are to do. Jesus taught us to love, to forgive, to pray, to trust, to fellowship with other believers, to worship His Father, to minister to the hurting, to proclaim the gospel to those who have not yet heard. That is what it means to make someone else a Christ-follower; it is to teach them to do what Jesus taught His followers to do.

A few years ago, a well-known pastor by the name of Kyle Idleman, wrote a book entitled, *Not a Fan*. The sub-title is: *Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus*. In that book, he makes the case that Jesus is not looking for fans; and yet, that is what many people have settled for being in their relationship to Jesus. They respect Him.

They admire Him. If His name was on the ballot, they would vote for Him. They go to church now and then because they like what He had to say. When it comes to actually doing what He said or obeying His commands, well, that's another story. They are fans; they are not followers.

Jesus did not die on the cross and rise from the dead so that you would become His fan. He is looking for followers.

Idleman entitled the first chapter of his book with the initials, D.T.R. Today's dating world is different than when I was in high school and college. Back then, if you asked a girl out and she said "yes," you might go to dinner and a movie, and you would call that a date. If you continued to ask, and she continued to say "yes," you could say that you were dating. At some point, you might ask her to "go steady." By that, you meant that you and she would be exclusive. Neither of you would go on a date with someone else.

In today's dating world, if two have been dating for some time, they need to have the D.T.R talk. Those initials stand for "Define the Relationship." They have to discuss where they are and where they see the relationship going. That is a good thing, a scary thing, but a good thing.

Idleman believes that we need to have the D.T.R talk with Jesus. We need to tell Him and ourselves whether we are just a fan, an enthusiastic admirer, or whether we intend to be a sold out, completely committed follower.

Have you just been a fan? Are you willing to become a follower? If you are a follower, ask Him to help you and use you to make other Jesus followers. That is what He has commissioned us to do. If you will say "yes" to Him, I can say to you: "My dear, terrified disciple, you are about to enter the most uncertain and thrilling period of your life."