

**Series:** Vision Month 2021

**Title:** Purpose — Why We Exist

**Text:** Matthew 22:37-40 and 28:18-20

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## **22:37**

When it comes to Christian living, the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. Much of the Christian life involves a battle over desires. Loving God and others, as opposed to loving self and the world, is to be the main focus of Christian living. When asked concerning the greatest commandment of the law, Jesus said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus’ statement concerning the greatest of God’s commands was a response to a question asked by an expert in Jewish Law. The man asked the question from insincere motives; he was trying “to test” Jesus (Matthew 22:35). Moments earlier, the Sadducees tried to trip Jesus up by drilling Him with obscure theological questions concerning marriage, remarriage, and the Resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33). When Jesus silenced His interrogators, the Pharisees similarly attempted to ensnare Jesus, hoping to show up their theological rivals. So, they sent “an expert in the law,” to ask Jesus a question concerning which command was the most weighty of the Hebrew Law.

Questions concerning which laws were most important was a regular hot topic at Jewish synagogues, and it was a decisive subject for the different religious factions in Israel. First-century scribes had extensive means of categorizing Old Testament laws and Rabbinical traditions. One scholar has recorded how scribal tradition promoted 248 positive commands and 365 prohibitive commands. The former number represented the supposed number of parts in a body and the latter represented the number of days in a year. All in all, there were 683 rabbinical commands in the first century, the same number of Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments.<sup>1</sup>

Many argued that the third commandment was most critical — “Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God, because the Lord will not leave anyone unpunished who misuses his name” (Exodus 20:7).<sup>2</sup> By broaching this subject, Jesus’ interrogator was putting the Lord on the spot, hoping to pigeon-hole Him into a theological corner. In doing so, he and his Pharisaical counterparts attempted to discredit Jesus’ ministry. Their end goal was to entrap Jesus in incriminating words so they might bring a charge against Him. Our Lord responded to His opponents by saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent, Marvin Richardson. *Word Studies in the New Testament*. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), [CD-Rom].

<sup>2</sup> Walvoord, John F. *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come, A Commentary on the First Gospel*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1974), 168.

important command” (Matthew 22:37). According to Jesus, an affectionate regard for God is the most important command of Scripture.

Some think of His instruction as a New Testament teaching alone. They don’t see its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. A more clear look at the Bible reveals that Jesus’ emphasis was grounded in God’s eternal Law. It was present in the Ten Commandments. One can note the way in which the first four commands deal with one’s devotion to God (cf. Exodus 20:1-8). In addition, one of the most famous passages of all Hebrew Scripture promoted the necessity of loving God. Deuteronomy 6:5, a passage referred to as the “Shema,” said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Jesus’ concept of loving God was not just a New Testament thing. It is as old as the Eternal God who is the embodiment of love (1 John 4:8).

Many modern religious people get caught up in the same doctrinally polarizing game of the first-century Pharisees and Sadducees, placing an unhealthy emphasis on pet doctrines, man-made cultural traditions, and political issues that aren’t important in the grand scheme of things. According to Jesus, such things aren’t what’s most important for faithful Christian living. He calls His people to make love the main thing. According to AT Robertson, a Greek Scholar, Jesus cut “through the rabbi’s pettifogging hair splitting to the heart of the problem.”<sup>3</sup> His words were aimed to bring an end to the debate concerning which was the greatest law of the Old Testament. While rabbis and their devotees debated and argued concerning the laws of the Canon and the Mishnah, they missed the true meaning of the it. Deuteronomy 6:5, the “Shema” as it was called, was the interpreting principle for all of Scripture. A devoted love for God, not debates over laws, was what was most important in God’s eyes.

In order to fully grasp the meaning of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 22:37, it is important to clarify what He meant about “love.” The word meant “to regard with strong affection” or “to take delight in.” Used in reference to a superior being, it conjured up ideas of devoted duty and respect, as well as faithful service.<sup>4</sup> It was a type of “totally unselfish love, a love of which human beings are capable only with the help of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5).<sup>5</sup>

Our modern idea of love, one which often views it as nothing more than a romantic feeling, has unfortunately created confusion concerning the Great Commandment. The love which Jesus calls us to is not just an emotional thing, something of a warm, fuzzy, butterflies in the stomach, and experiential ecstasies. Christian charity is a conscientious, selfless determination to put God and others first, even above one’s self. Real love isn’t just about desires; it involves conscientious devotion. It is not just a thing of feeling; it’s a thing of faithfulness. It will compel a person to duty and service.

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<sup>3</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>4</sup> Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

<sup>5</sup> Comfort, Philip. *Life Application Bible Commentary: Matthew*. (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996), 443.

Jesus Himself said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands” (John 14:15). Perhaps our Lord Himself was the best example of such devotion, because Scripture says, “No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). I’m so thankful Jesus didn’t just say He loved us, though He did (cf. John 3:16). He didn’t merely give lip service regarding His care for humanity. He put words into action and sacrificed His life for us.

The concern for God and others which Jesus desired of His followers is one that involves the totality of the human person. He said His followers are to love Him with all their “heart,” “soul,” and “mind,” using three terms from the first century that referred to three different parts of the human constitution. The first term referenced the place from which all emotions, desires, and feelings flow.<sup>6</sup> The second spoke of the immaterial, inward part of man, as opposed to the material, outward part. The soul, in Hebrew thought, was that part of man that differentiated him from the animal kingdom. It was regarded as the part of humanity that related to God. The “mind” was often seen as “the psychological faculty of understanding, reasoning, thinking, and deciding.”<sup>7</sup>

While each of the aforementioned concepts — heart, soul, and mind — all had slightly different meanings, they all overlapped in different ways in the first-century understanding of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Jesus did not mean to speak technically when He used the triad of terms. There is no need to attempt to precisely define how we love the Lord with our “mind” or the other parts of our nature. Jesus’ point was to say that one should aim to love God with the entirety of his or her being. One has commented, “Jesus’ purpose was to show that a person’s total being must be involved in loving God. Nothing must be held back because God holds nothing back” (John 3:16 and John 15:13).

## **28:19-20**

Matthew 28:19-20 contains some of Jesus’ last words before His ascension into heaven. Matthew closed His gospel account with the words for good reason. He aimed to intentionally focus on the Lord’s commission to the Church. He wanted to give the sense that Jesus’ ministry did not end with the close of his gospel account. It had actually just begun. With the giving of what we popularly call “the Great Commission,” Jesus provided a clear direction regarding the purpose and mission of His Church. Though the Church would technically not be birthed until the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost (Acts 2), it had a clear statement of purpose from its Master.

The main focus of the Great Commission is the instruction to “make disciples.” In the original language of the text, Matthew used a verb form of a Greek noun that referred to a “follower,” “learner,” or “pupil.” One has commented on the meaning of the word by saying, “Apprentice might be an equivalent term. A disciple attached himself to a teacher, identified with him, learned from him, and lived with him. He learned, not simply

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<sup>6</sup> Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

<sup>7</sup> Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

<sup>8</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, [CD-Rom].

by listening, but also by doing.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ use of the term indicated that His followers were to be committed to leading others to become followers of Jesus.

In every generation, Christians have the same mission – make disciples. No local congregation or gathering of believers has the liberty of inventing a different mission. Plain and simple, we exist to lead others to follow Jesus. While many recognize this as being true, it is often difficult to be faithful to the task of disciple making? Throughout Church history, many have struggled with how to go about this task. Interestingly, the passage before us actually contains great insight regarding how disciples are to engage in making more disciples. The words “make disciples” appear in verbiage that evokes a command in the original language of the text. That command is, “make disciples.” Matthew surrounded that command with three verbs, participles to be exact. By looking at the three in Matthew 28:19-20, one can gain great insight regarding how one can actually obey Jesus’ command to make disciples.

The first participle is translated “go.” When studying the English Bible, some mistake this first verb as being a command. Matthew did not use the imperative mood (the verb mood commonly used for commands in Koine Greek); instead, He used a present participle.<sup>10</sup> One could translated Jesus’ instruction as meaning “while you are going...” The sense is that disciple making is to be something believers do as a lifestyle. It should not be a task relegated to a special season or schedule. Instead, Christians should aim to always be in the habit of leading others to Jesus. At work, in the home, at school, or in the marketplace, there should be a focus on encouraging others to follow the Lord. Christ followers should be on mission every day and everywhere they go. An understanding of this reality will help Christians and churches see how the work of the Great Commission is to be done. Each individual believer has a circle of friends, family members, and acquaintances. Within that sphere, each should prayerfully labor to lead others into an abiding relationship with Jesus.

The second verb of importance within the Great Commission is translated “baptizing them.” For many, the act of Baptism may seem like a trivial or secondary issue within the Christian life. Such a perspective is unfortunate, when we consider the fact that Jesus made it a part of one of His most important mandates. In His Divine wisdom, He made baptism a foundational part of Christian profession. It is an integral to the mission of making disciples.

Baptism was a popular activity in the ancient world. The word literally meant “to dip” or “to immerse.” Our English term for the act is a transliteration, not a translation, of the Greek word “baptizō.” Due to controversy surrounding the ordinance, the first English translators of the Bible chose not to translate the word. Doing so could have led to imprisonment or death. It is important that we recapture the original meaning of the term. For the early Church, it conveyed the act of one being dipped under and covered

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<sup>9</sup> Wiersbe, [CD-Rom].

<sup>10</sup> Wiersbe, [CD-Rom].

in water. This was all of Divine design, for baptism was intended to depict the way in which the old life is buried at salvation (Romans 6:3-4).

Baptism was of Jewish origin. The Hebrew Scriptures were filled with ceremonies that involved holy washings and immersions. In time, the rite of baptism spread to different pagan religions. One has described how the famous Roman Mithra cult baptized: "A central feature of the ceremonial associated with Mithras was the taurobolium, the ritual slaughter of a bull which commemorated and repeated Mithras' primeval act. The initiate was baptized in its blood, partaking of its life-giving properties. It may be noted that this part of the ceremonial closely resembled the ritual of the cult of Cybele, the Great Mother of Asia Minor, which had been brought to Rome three centuries before Christ..."<sup>11</sup>

Jesus took the ancient Jewish practice and Christianized it. As He had morphed the Passover meal into a new Christian ordinance (Mark 14:12-26), He did something similar to baptism. He told the Twelve to baptize people "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). His reference to the Trinity was not a mere formulaic expression to be added on to a ceremony in a meaningless fashion. His intent was to show that the Christian mode of baptism was unique and special. While Jews baptized people into Judaism, and the Roman Army baptized people into Mithraism, the Church was to baptize people in order to acknowledge faith in the one, true, triune God. One has said Jesus' reference to the Trinity "denotes the one to whom allegiance is pledged in baptism."<sup>12</sup>

This brings us to the reason why we baptize. Baptism does not provide salvation. One is saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Baptism is not a means of simply securing membership in a local congregation. The main purpose of baptism is identification with Christ. It is an act whereby one has publicly proclaims that he or she has been born again, and that he or she is following Christ. From studying the book of Acts, we learn that the early Church was faithful to encourage new converts to obey Jesus' command in this matter (Acts 2:37-38).

The instruction of Jesus, along with the model of the early Church, gives us great insight on how we can make disciples. If we want to fulfill the Great Commission, we must urge professing believers to be baptized. Baptism is important because it is a test of obedience. If one is not willing to be baptized, he or she is likely not converted. By calling folks to follow the Lord in this ordinance, the Church has a way of separating the proverbial wheat from the chaff. Baptism often reveals who is truly saved and who is not.

But baptism is also a means of training people in obedience. It has often been called "the first step of faith" in the Christian life. It is for this reason Jesus made it a part of the Great Commandment. In allowing him or herself to be publicly dunked in water in

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<sup>11</sup> Smart, Ninian. *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Scribner, 1996), [CD-Rom].

<sup>12</sup> Carson, [CD-Rom].

front of a group of people, one quickly learns that faithfulness to Christ requires selfless sacrifice and obedience.

If churches would follow the Lord's instructions concerning baptism, they would be better at fulfilling the Great Commission. Baptism encourages people to be bold witnesses in their faith. It teaches new converts the importance of obedience. It creates a dividing line, separating real believers from counterfeit believers. In the end, it does a lot to encourage and strengthen the Church. If a church wants to be faithful to Christ's call to make disciples, it should place great weight on the importance of believer's baptism.

The word translated "teaching" is the third verb in our text that sheds light on how we can faithfully fulfill the Great Commission. The original Greek referred to the acts of instruction. Jesus' inclusion of the verb reveals that instruction is an important part of Christian growth. Christianity is a religion that places great emphasis on the importance of teaching. While all may have different levels of spiritual giftedness (Romans 12:6-8), and although some may not be as naturally bent towards the acquisition of knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:8), all Christians are called to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). We see precedent for this place of teaching within the Church when we consider the New Testament's descriptions of the practices of the early Church (Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 4:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:2).

It is important to note that Christian instruction isn't something of mere book learning. While other philosophies and religions may have an informational focus, Christian instruction has a transformational focus. In the Great Commission, Jesus told His disciples to teach people "to observe everything" He had commanded. The word translated "observe" is an important one. It did not refer to the act of simply looking at or gazing upon an item. It meant "to keep," "to obey," "to pay attention to," or "to guard." If disciples want to make more disciples, they must instruct new converts to fully obey Jesus' teaching. Without such an emphasis on obedience, a church will inevitably become spiritually diluted and deceived (James 1:22). The mission of the church will stall.

As with His command to baptize, Jesus' command concerning teaching people to obey was strategic. It is in teaching people to actually follow Jesus' commands that the Church actually taps into the power that will grow the Church. In a world in which styles of music, modes of communication, cleverly designed programs, and human-centered marketing techniques are often regarded as the most effective means of growing a church, Jesus' words reveal that life transformation is the more effective route. At the end of the day, God gets the most glory through the transformed lives of His children. He loves using the testimony of the redeemed to introduce others to redemption (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This is why Jesus spoke of His disciples with the following words:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine

before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

If individual congregations want to “make disciples” as Jesus has commanded, they must hold up a high standard of obedience to Jesus’ teaching. When devotion to Christ’s Word is compromised, the light of Christ grows dim in the lives of His children. The end result is the world sees no difference in professing Christians. Consequently, the lost are not compelled to take gospel summons seriously.