**What is the Greatest Need in the Church?**

**Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 1:1-9**

If I were to ask you what our greatest need in church today is, what would you say? One person I read said “the most fundamental need is an eye-opening experience of the holiness of God.” If we could only get a glimpse of God in all of his glory, we would see how much we have been forgiven and it would cure so much of our idleness in our churches today.

Others would say the greatest need of the hour is to return to a proper understanding of the doctrine of justification - this was the central battle point during the reformation and is still the most central issue today.

Others would say, our greatest need is to understand sanctification - how we grow as a Christian. Others would say the greatest need is for men and women to embrace their God given roles as men and women - and for men to start being men again and women to start being women. Others would say the most important need of the day is an acute awareness of the imminent return of Christ - and that Christ really could return at any second, so we need to be ready. And still others would say our greatest need is evangelism, that is telling lost people, those who have never heard and those who have, the message of the gospel.

And all of these are great needs. If you asked 100 different church men you might get 100 different answers. But something I remembered I was told a long time ago and that is — always pay extra special close attention to a person’s last words. And that is what we are going to do today. We are going look at Jesus last words. I think we will find in Jesus last words what is actually the greatest need for the church. And just a hint — all of those other things and so much more will be contained in those last words.

The last words of Jesus can be found at the end of Luke. At the end of Mark. And at the end of Matthew. And at the beginning of the book of Acts. The two places we are going to look today is the Book of Acts and the Book of Matthew.

**So, let’s get started.**

Matthew 28:16-20, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Now let’s read Acts 1 starting in verse 1, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So, when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

**The greatest need of the hour, t**he greatest need in the church today is discipleship. Why? Because it has always been the greatest need. It is the great commission.

You could very easily put these two texts together and have them come out saying: Wait in Jerusalem until you receive the promise of God, which is the Holy Spirit, for you will then receive power to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) so that you can baptize, and make disciples and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:18-20).

The Spirit is the central figure in the books of Acts. The start of the church and the expansion of the church is the theme. The thing Jesus promised way back in Matthew 16:8, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” And the Kingship or the Messiahship of Jesus is the main emphasis in the book of Matthew. “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it”. The authority of Jesus as King as Lord is over and over again emphasized in Matthew and the power of the Spirit is emphasized over and over again in the book of Acts.

So, the Holy Spirit comes upon them? This is so easy for all to see. Look at Acts 2, starting in vs. 1. “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Now what will they do? They will be his witnesses. Witnesses of what? To all that they have seen and heard from Jesus.

If you notice something, there is only one command in all of this. Two, if you count the part where he told them to wait until they receive the promise of the Father.

But really, the command is to make Disciples. He actually never commanded them to be witnesses. He just states matter-of-factly. You will be my witnesses. This is what will happen. After you receive the promised power of the Holy Spirit you will be my witnesses. Almost kind of like saying, after you are born, you will breath air. It’s just going to happen. If you are a Christian you will be a witness for Jesus. The trick is, is to be a good one.

So really, the command is not to be witnesses. You will be that. The command is to make disciples. Go and make disciples, he says. That is not a suggestion. That is a command. While you are being witnesses, do so in such an intentional way that you are making disciples. And what does that look like? Dunking people under water, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded.

Baptizing signifies a person coming to faith … signifies new life in Christ. And when they do that, we are to baptize them to signify that new life.

As a sign that their old self has died with Jesus on the cross … and that as they go under the water …. it is a sign that their old self was buried with Jesus … and when they come up out of the water …. it is a sign that they are raised to newness of life. That’s what baptism is.

And lest we all forget. We believers have the Holy Spirit. So somehow everything is just a little bit more than a sign as well. Because we are united to Christ in those things through the power of the Spirit.

Just as Galatians 2:20 says, “I am crucified with Christ yet nevertheless it is not I that lives, but Christ that lives in me”. So, they are not just signs. Though they are. But not merely signs. They are also realities. That’s what baptism is.

It is a sign of people coming to faith. And that’s what we are to do. I know it seems impossible. And it is. But we do have the Holy Spirit. And we are to bring people to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is share the gospel. The good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and pray that with the hearing would come the gift of saving faith.

And then after people come to faith and are baptized … we are to teach them. You see, when a person first becomes a Christian … they aren’t instantly downloaded with everything there is to know … and then instantly given all the right affections so that they will do them.

Yes, God could have done it that way. In any part of this equation, he doesn’t actually need us. But for whatever reason … and it is kind of glorious if you think about it … he has chosen to do everything he is doing in the world at this time through us…. through his people.

Because the Holy Spirit lives in each one of his people. And God intends, not only for people to come to faith, by other people talking about and showing others about, the one they love, but that is also how he intends for people to grow in their faith.

And so, we are to teach new believers as they come into the household of God all that Jesus commanded … and since the whole Bible is really all about Jesus … we are to teach this whole book.

And isn’t that really what they started doing in the book of Acts …. oh yes it started with an explosion … “After Peter got done preaching, 3000 were saved, baptized and added to the household of God….” (Acts 2:36).

I am not sure if we should expect things like that nowadays … but it sure wouldn’t hurt… God is still the same God he was yesterday. He is still the God of miracles … and that also means … don’t take it for granted when even one lost sinner comes home … that is huge … and all of heaven is rejoicing when it happens.

But think about it …. by the time Jesus is done with his ministry on earth … there really is very few followers of Jesus. I mean those with genuine real authentic faith. There is only a few. Many followed him for his signs and wonders and healing but at the end of Jesus’s ministry when he was dying on a cross … Who was there for him? I can only think of a couple.

They needed something more. And God knows this as well. Jesus came to the end with very few followers. It blows this whole notion out of the water … that all people need is to see Jesus… then they would trust in him … then they would follow him.

No, my friends, unless something more happens, people will not follow Jesus … unless something more happens … everyone will walk away sad … And God knows this.

And so, God sends the Holy Spirit in the power of the new covenant. Oh yes, my friends, this promise was promised way back when. It is why Peter is quoting Joel 2:28 when he is preaching. It is what Jeremiah foresaw, at least in part, when he spoke of the New Covenant 31:31, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah”.

Did you know that this is the only time that the words New Covenant are found in the Old Testament … and it’s tricky because it says the house of Israel and the house of Judah?

So how is this the New Covenant that we talk about being fulfilled in the New Testament? So, I don’t know friends, maybe there is a dual fulfillment to this prophecy. Maybe it is being fulfilled in this age in the church …. Because it is undeniable that we are in the new covenant.

Jesus himself said at the last supper, this is the new covenant that has been fulfilled by my blood. Go compare Hebrews chapter 8 or Hebrews chapter 10 to Jeremiah 31 once. It is undeniable. We are under a New Covenant. Now maybe there will be another fulfillment when all of Israel is saved as Romans 11 talks about but until then we know that a New Testament, New Covenant fulfillment is happening right now.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, Jeremiah 31 says… when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.”

In the Old Covenant, it was a mixed community … the old covenant was with the nation of Israel and within the covenant community there was true people of God (the remnant) and there was people who were not truly part of the people of God but they were all part of the covenant community. But in the New Covenant it is all believers … because God has sent his Spirit in a New Covenant way … by the way this is probably the best argument for believers’ baptism… that is the sign of the new covenant is only for believers because it is only believers in the new covenant … and the old covenant it was circumcision and it was a mixed community because all were circumcised but not all were believers. But in the new covenant the community is pure and it is to be made up of believers only.

My point is and the reason for looking at this text, is to see that the power that was promised by Jesus in Acts 1 was also promised way back in Jeremiah…. You see that phrase there in vs. 33 of Jeremiah 31 … “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

What was the people of God’s biggest problem in the old covenant? It was being faithful to God and faithfully doing what God had called them to do. What was God’s solution going to be? What was God’s promise to deal with their constant wanderings? How was God going put his law in his people and write it on their hearts?

Ezekiel 36:27 tells us how he would do it, “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” His law wasn't always just going to be written on tablets of stone but one day on his people’s hearts. 2 Corinthians 3:3 says, “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

And Paul goes on to say 2 Corinthians 3, “who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?”

Jesus came to the end of his earthly ministry with hardly any followers … There has to be something more and Jesus knows there is going to be something more … God’s promise …. Any of you every remember the text in \_\_\_\_ where Jesus says, “greater works will you do than me”. And then he tells them in Acts 1, wait until you receive power when the Spirit comes upon you. What else is going to send these apostles to those hated Samaritans? And reach across that huge cultural and racial divide without the Holy Spirit of love coming in?

If it weren’t for the Holy Spirit, the great commission, I am afraid, would be just another Jonah go to Nineveh story. You know that Old Testament story where God told Jonah to go to the enemy, Nineveh and preach, and Jonah says no way … and is running from God’s mission because he doesn’t want to tell his enemies about the grace of his might God because he knows if he tells them, they would repent and turn to him and be saved and he doesn’t want that to happen… And so, it would be the same thing here … if it weren’t for the promised power of the Holy Spirit, except this time God would have to call 12 huge fish, one for each Apostle. Because each one would be running just the same.

And you can see that, Jesus coming to the end of his time here on earth, and he was abandoned … all the miracles he had done and here he was all alone … a few followers looking on at the cross on the fateful day … and a handful barely hanging on, locked away in a room … because they were so doubting everything they had believed …. how could this one they had believed to be the king … how could he have just died on a cross if that was true?

And when he rose from the grave … he spent some time with his few followers … barely holding on by a thread of faith … 40 days more … to be exact he spent with them … this had to be mind blowing … but even at the end of that … it says in in Matthew 28 in verse 16, that some were still doubting …

But then the Holy Spirit came in Act 2 … and everything changes … those who were once meek became bold … Peter who once denied Jesus 3 times at the end of Jesus’s life … Peter who was told by Jesus “get behind me Satan” … Peter, the cowering, cowardly, always looking out for himself Peter …. all of a sudden becomes bold like a lion and preaches a most powerful sermon, and not a Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life type of sermon. But a repent … and turn to Christ … because of all of your all sinfulness, you are all guilty of murdering Jesus … repent …. and therefore, turn to trust Christ type of sermon …

And so those who were cowardly become bold and those who were blind begin to see and 3000 people were saved … and more and more begin to be added to the church daily and they go about doing what they were told to do … following Jesus’s last instructions.

and since then … think about … the movement of Jesus Christ starting out with a good chunk new Jewish believers on the fateful Pentecost day setting out to save a people all over the world … people who by all accounts before this new covenant power with this new covenant command … they would have very much thought of as being unclean … Jerusalem …. that’s where it started … who knows … at that time … could it have been much bigger than Eau Claire… but now it has gone out to Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world. It really has.

My friends America is the uttermost parts of the world. Can you imagine telling those early disciples where the gospel would be today? But there is still a great need. It’s the greatest need of our day. It’s still the great commission. There are a lot of things we can be doing in the world, but there is nothing as God ordained as this. This is God’s mission. You can either live your life trying to get God to come join you in what you are doing or you can go join in with what God is doing. What you going to do, Jesus follower? The baton is being passed to you.

Every time a new person comes into the family of God through faith and repentance, the baton is passed. Perpetually down through the ages it is being passed.

It’s explicit in the command…. teach others to observe all that I have commanded … part of what he has commanded, is to teach others to teach … so the command is not just to make disciples…. it is to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. So, believer, Christ follower, you have been handed a baton. I think you know what you need to need to do with it.

Every single one of us, if we are currently trusting in Christ, in some way, somehow, can trace that back to this very setting found in Matthew chapter 28 and Acts 1 …. not sure if we could humanly trace it out but God can … We have a family tree and it starts there.

You are a Christian because the people standing before Jesus that day received the Holy Spirit and went with it. What are you going to do with what you been given? Better yet, what are we going to do with what we have been given?

We are a church. People called out of the world to gather together in this place, to call other people out of the world. For such a time as this. Do you think the world needs people like us this day and age? I think so. Let’s live up to the task that Christ has called us to do.

In a lot of ways, the church across the world could be described as about 10,000 miles wide and about 2 inches deep. The church in the world is not deep and wide … but rather … wide and shallow. And how can this be?

If the Holy Spirit did come in such a way. If the church did start in such a way. With so much power. Where is he now? Weren't we told he would be with us always, even to the end of the age? Did the Holy Spirit leave? Was the promise not true?

I was just sharing a month ago when I was teaching Sunday School about a study I had read that had been done amongst a group of 5000 professing Christians and how the majority didn’t even understand some of the most essential truths of the Christian faith. Most believed completely unbiblical things. How can this be the case? How can this be the case if the promise of the Holy Spirit came and with that should come power for living and doing what God commands?

Well for one …. We are told we can stifle the Holy Spirit. We are told we can quench the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a force. The Holy Spirit is a person. And it is possible to break relationship with him ... It is possible to put a barrier there.

Maybe the church as whole across the world or maybe so many believers as a whole are quenching the Holy Spirit. Maybe a lot of people who say or think they are believers are really not. Maybe it is because we haven’t been clear in our teaching or have completely disregarded teaching for other things. Who knows. I think these are at least some of the reasons.

I also know another thing, that at the end of the age there is going to be a falling away … an apostasy in the last days. And we also know we are in the last days … Acts chapter 2 it’s very self says we are in the last days … but I also know this, that doesn’t mean it has to be us and it doesn’t mean we have to accept it or be ok with it. No. Not ever.

The mission is still the same … for faithful followers of Jesus … the mission is still the same … we are to snatch people from as if they were being saved from fire … because they really are … and how are we to do that …. by making disciples and teaching all that he has commanded … my friends in the days to come …. there is a great need for this … not only because the need is the call and the call is to go do it … but also because in the days to come …. only those who are deep rooted …. only those whose roots go way down … are going to survive the days coming.

Those who are shallow and wide … individually and churches as a whole are going to fall away. Saints. Keep your eyes off the world. Keep your eyes on the world just enough to know that it is filled with people who need Jesus. But one thing is for sure, we are not to be getting our marching orders from the world. We are to be marching into the world. Proclaiming the death burial and resurrection for forgiveness of sins to all who would repent and judgment to all those who don't (Acts 17:3) Taking great time to teach all those who surrender their lives to Christ to observe everything he has commanded.

This will always seem like foolishness to the world … It's time to stop compromising Christ mission. It's time to stop justifying and compromising our thoughts and actions and just to know right up front, that the natural part of our mind, the part that is at war with the Spirit inside of us will not understand and it will fight against us.

But we need to take every thought captive and fight with all our might by the power that God is working in us to follow after Christ and only Christ. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” (1 Corinthians 3:19).

The leadership of this church has come up with a goal for each of us to at least bring one new person into church in the next year …. and that’s great … I wholly applaud that. I have been really working at being much more intentional in engaging with people when I go out in public.

For those of you who don’t know me. I might seem really bold. Especially if all you do is read my Facebook post. But I am not. I am actually really shy. It’s easy to be bold on Facebook or from behind this pulpit. It’s much more difficult to get out there and engage with people. But we have to and it takes intentionality.

One of the things I have been doing lately is trying to carry gospel tracts every time I leave the house. Yes. It is true, most people probably don’t read them. But somebody might. I read a story of a Japanese man who got saved back in the 60’s. In fact, he was the squadron leader that lead the Kamikazes to bomb Pearl Harbor. And he survived. Years later when he returned to Japan. He one day picked up a gospel tract that a missionary had designed and left at a subway station. That Japanese war veteran who had wreaked so much havoc on American soil, gave his life to Christ that day. And the remaining years of his life he spent as a missionary to people who are so badly in need of Christ, even to this very day.

So, they do work. Maybe one out of a million. But you never know who that one out of a million will be. But not only that, they also work almost like a stone in your shoe or a string on your finger type of thing, to remind you, what you are supposed to be about. We Christians so often lose our way every day and forget what our mission is, what our calling is. And carrying tracts is a good way to remind yourself.

If you are too scared to give them to people personally, leave them with a tip at a restaurant. And just a really good suggestion, if you are leaving a gospel tract with a tip. Leave a really good tip. Commend the gospel my friends. We need to try our best to make it look as good as it really is. It’s already offensive enough to the natural man.

Or pin it up on bulletin boards at stores, or laundry mats, or put it on shelves. Leave them everywhere in anywhere. Get creative. It’s just one idea. We can brainstorm to come up with so much more. But at the same time, we have to be praying that our level of discipleship would increase in this church as well. Because I tell you what, it will not do any good to bring new believers into this church if they have nothing to plug into when they get here.

I heard of a sermon that a really popular Pastor preached, I am not going to say his name … I actually have a hard time calling him a Pastor when I hear what he is saying - but this is what he said in one of his sermons: “We don’t teach from Books of the Bible because it gets in the way of evangelism. We don’t offer different kinds of Bible studies because it gets in the way of evangelism. We don’t teach doctrine because it gets in the way of evangelism. If you want to be fed God’s word or have the Bible explained to you then you are a fat lazy Christian and you need to shut up and get to work or you need to leave this church because we ONLY do evangelism.”

And this guy has a church that boast of 20,000 people. Really, is that we want to be like. That is clearly not the mission of Jesus.

We want to have studies here. We want to as we gather here weekly to have the word be the central aspect of our gathering. We need to have Bible studies and discipleship groups. And we need them to be important and we need them to be good. And we need them to be a priority. Why? Because God’s word says they are to be! Go into all the world and teach!!! Making disciples! In fact, I would dare say without doing this aspect of God’s mission, we are not actually doing God’s mission. Which means we are not actually doing evangelism.

God’s mission is not doing whatever it takes to get people to pray a prayer. Or do whatever it takes to get people to accept Jesus. Or dumb everything down, compromising all the key issues to get people to accept Jesus. Which Jesus would they be accepting anyway? No. You will never find that in the Bible. The Bible says, go make disciples. Faithfully be a witness. Faithfully make disciples.

So, as we are trying to be intentionally evangelistic, we have to try just as hard, if not harder to be simultaneously, intentionally engaging in discipleship. That means being disciples, discipling others, and being discipled by others. We have to be intentional about this. It will not happen by accident. We have to be trying to figure out how to create these opportunities.

This sermon is obviously, not an end all to be all ... but I am praying with everything in me that it would be a catalyst to push us forward. Rolland often talks about little pockets of revival.

You know, it could happen here, even in Osseo … It could happen in, and because of and through this church …. It could …. It really could. wouldn’t that be great. We serve a mighty God…. but I tell you one thing … it is not going to happen apart from God’s prescription. It is not going to happen by being at odds with what God has called us to do. It is going to happen by being in line with what he has called us to do. By being disciples who are bent on making disciples who make disciples. I tell you one other thing. It’s going to take a lot of intentionality.

Start praying on it. Start thinking on it. Start causing your mind to revolve around the mission of God. Bring every thought captive and subordinate to this goal. This is the number one cause.

Everything else is subordinate to this. Everything. There is a lot of death in the world. There is a lot of destruction in the world. There is a lot of pain in the world. There is a lot of hurt in the world. There is a lot of mayhem out there.

Let our church be place that is trying with all the grace that God is working in us, to be a platoon, a hospital, a training grounds, and a sending agency, all rolled up into one.

The war we are in makes any flesh and blood war that has ever happened in the history of mankind, including now, look like child's play. The stakes are eternal. Our mission - to be witnesses in Jerusalem (that means right here in Osseo in our very homes) and in all of Judea (right here in Trempealeau County) and Samaria (the United States), and to the ends of the earth. To every tribe, tongue, and nation (Acts 1:8) With the goal of bringing people to saving faith, baptizing them and then training them to be disciples who will eventually go make disciples themselves (Matt. 28:18-20).