



Jesus Loves the Little Children: The Sanctity of Human Life & the Great Commission

David Platt January 16, 2019
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If you happen to have a Bible with you—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to Matthew 19. I love preaching the Word; it’s like icing on the cake to preach after Stephen Curtis Chapman sings. I was telling him backstage that I can remember going to one of his concerts in high school. I remember listening all day long to some of his songs. I don’t know what it was, but just a couple weeks ago, my wife Heather and I got on an old-school Stephen Curtis Chapman kick, so we pulled his music up on iTunes and were blaring it in our living room. “Saddle up your horses—we’ve got a trail to blaze.” We just went from song to song.

In fact, the pastor who married us had taken some lines from the song “I will be here for you” and had woven those into the vows he wrote for us. So Heather and I found that song and were slow dancing in the room with that in the background. Our kids were wondering what was going on. We told them, “You don’t understand.” But I praise God for Stephen and his influence in my life through music.

To hear from God’s Word, I’ve been given the topic “Jesus Loves the Little Children: the Sanctity of Life and the Great Commission.” Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world—right? I remember one Saturday night when our family was gathered in one of the kid’s rooms for family worship. I was preaching the next day on the Great Commission. So I said, “Hey, kids, before we pray, I want you to know what I’m going to do tomorrow in church. Let’s pray that tomorrow God would lead somebody to go and take the gospel to another nation.”

I looked at our first son, Caleb, whom we adopted from Kazakhstan, and said, “Maybe tomorrow God will lead somebody to go to Kazakhstan.” He kind of smiled. Our second son, Joshua, who came along the more natural way, was sitting there, along with our daughter Mara, who is from China. I then looked at Mara and said, “Maybe tomorrow God will lead somebody to go to China.” She got a big smile on her face. Isaiah, our fourth child who also came along the more natural way, was really small at that point.

Then I sat back and said, “Or maybe God will lead somebody to go to Africa.” That’s when Joshua perked up and said eagerly, “Is that where I’m from?” He wanted a place to be from as well. But Caleb chimed in with, “No, you’re from Birmingham, Alabama.” Joshua sat back, looking pretty dejected.

The trust is that all the children of the world are a treasure to be cherished. Yet we live in a world where oftentimes children are seen as a hindrance or even a burden to be avoided. Whether it’s in court arguments or undercover videos, we live in a world that devalues, disregards, mistreats and ultimately steals life from children. But Scripture brings us to these words in Matthew 19:

¹³ Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴ but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” ¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went away.

When even the disciples of Jesus saw children as a nuisance to be avoided, Jesus saw them as a treasure to be welcomed, to be received, loved, prayed for and cherished. He laid His hands on them. Just picture Jesus praying for them—after playing with them. So then nine chapters later in Matthew’s Gospel, we hear these words from Jesus:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

What does Jesus’ challenge and commission in Matthew 28 have to do with His value for children in Matthew 19? I think these passages have everything to do with each other. For into a world that devalues children, Jesus has given His followers a clear commission. That Great Commission has everything to do with the sanctity of human life.

Consider this commission to go. Christ compels, calls, commands us to go into the world, into the culture around us. The Great Commission was clearly and definitely not a call to sit back and stay silent in a world of evil and sin and suffering. It was a call to stand up and speak clearly in a world of evil and sin and suffering. It’s what Jesus had told His disciples in Matthew 10:8: “Go...*heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.*” In other words, go to the sick. Go to the dying. Go to the diseased. Go to the dangerous. Go when it’s not easy. Go when it’s costly.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:16, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” He told them, “People will hate you because of Me. When they persecute you, do this...” Not “if they persecute you,” but “when they persecute you.” From the very beginning, Jesus designed for, called and commanded His followers to run toward need, not away from it; to engage a world in need, not to turn a deaf ear to it.

If we're not careful, we miss this. Instead of discipling Christians in the world, we do a better job at disinfecting Christians from the world. Don't we often have a dangerous tendency to focus on disinfecting Christians? What do I mean by that? We isolate them in a spiritual safe deposit box called a church building, where we teach them to be good. We define success in our churches by how many people we can get into our buildings, where we are insulated and isolated for a couple hours every week from the realities in the world around us. In those buildings we're taught to be good, which is basically defined by what we avoid in this world. "Don't do this. Don't do that." It's holiness determined by what you don't participate in.

At this point we may be one of the only organizations in the world defining success according to what we don't do. So we live decent lives in decent homes, with decent jobs and decent families, as decent citizens and in it all, we're decent church members. But if we're not careful, we can go through our entire Christian lives and never meaningfully engage with a world in need around us.

Discipling, however, is much different. Disinfecting Christians involves isolating them from the world and teaching them to be good; discipling Christians involves propelling Christians into the world to risk their lives for the gospel. Then the world around us becomes our focus and we measure success in the church, not by the hundreds or even thousands we can get into our buildings, but by the hundreds or even thousands who are leaving our buildings to take on the world with the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

All of a sudden, holiness is now defined by what we do. We are now brothers and sisters taking Jesus at His word, engaging with the world—even when it's costly. When Jesus said these words to His disciples in Matthew 28, He was not telling them to come down off that mountain, huddle together in small groups and disciple each other for the rest of their lives. He was calling them to engage a world with the gospel.

So in a world that devalues life and denigrates children, we don't have the option of sitting back and staying silent. We stand up and speak clearly, compassionately and courageously—each of us. We go, right where we live and wherever God leads. We go to women who are struggling to see how life goes on if they have this baby. We go to them, love and serve them. We care for them as we come alongside them. We go to men who maybe are encouraging a pregnant girlfriend or wife to have an abortion. We stand alongside them and help them see the awesome work of creation God has begun in this precious woman's womb.

We go to women, we go to men and we go to children—to the thousands of children in mothers' wombs right now whose futures are in doubt. We go for the unborn. We labor for the unborn. We don't sit back content to wring our hands in pious concern while multitudes of babies are aborted. Christ's commission compels us to go—and to baptize.

Now, what does baptism have to do with the sanctity of life? Think about it. Baptism is a new Christian's initial public declaration of faith in Christ. The whole picture in baptism is of the gospel of Jesus Who paid the price for our sin and rose from the dead. This, without question, is the greatest need of every man, woman and child in the world.

Every single one of us in this room, and every single person in the world, is a sinner who has turned from God's way to our way. Abortion is just one way among thousands that we have all said, in different ways, "Our way is better than God's way." This is at the root of every one of our hearts. In this way, we have sinned against God and we all stand guilty before God. The greatest news in all the world is that God loves us anyway.

God loves us so much that He has sent His Son to pay the price for all our sins. Jesus, on a cross, took the judgment due for all of our sin upon Himself, died the death we deserved to die, then rose from the dead, conquering sin and the grave. This is the greatest news in all the world. Sin has been conquered, death has been defeated and eternal life is available to all who turn from their sin and trust in Him.

So to all who believe this good news, go and proclaim this good news so that men, women and children around us might hear it, believe and in so doing receive an entirely new heart hard-wired to want God's way instead of our way. We're given a heart that desires what God desires, that loves what God loves—including children in the womb. The power of the gospel message, in and of itself, possesses a dynamic charge that detonates the heart's desire for abortion. It changes hearts when men and women are brought from blindness to light, from spiritual death to spiritual life, and it's powerfully portrayed in this picture of baptism. Everything changes. The first and most fundamental way we can work for the unborn is through proclamation of the gospel in order to see hearts changed to want what God wants, to be reconciled to God and then to live a new life.

Then to take it a step further, because baptism is not just a Christian's initial declaration of faith in Christ, it's also that new Christian's public identification with the body of Christ as a member of His church. The church is a community of men and women who care for one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens and lay down their lives for each other.

For every man or woman considering the abortion of a baby, one of their greatest needs without question is community—a community of people who will love them as family, who will care for them as brothers and sisters, as their own blood. They need a community of people who will help them, serve them and not give up on them through months of pregnancy and years of parenting. God has uniquely designed and equipped His church to care for children and their mothers. When we are obeying the Great Commission, we are seeing that kind of community come to life. There's a reason James 1:27 says religion that God our Father looks at as pure and faultless is supposed to look after orphans and widows in their distress.

So what happens when, not just individual Christ followers, but local church communities decide we have been given a stewardship of opportunity to care for and lay down our lives for mothers with unwanted pregnancies and their kids, for orphans around us, for children in the foster care system? This is what happens when we decide to go and baptize. We proclaim the greatest news in such a way that people's lives are changed and new community is formed. A community that embodies the love of Jesus and teaches the Word of Jesus. A community that teaches Jesus' instruction "...to obey everything I have commanded you."

This is where transformation of the mind and heart goes to an entirely new level, as the whole counsel of God comes to bear on an issue like the sanctity of life. So reading through the Bible, all it takes is one chapter to realize that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God with the unique capacity to know and relate to God, reflecting God. One book later—in Exodus 21:22-25—we see the value God places on a child in the womb.

In the pages that follow, we see how God fashions us in the womb (Job 31:15). He knows us in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5). He calls us and names us from the womb (Isaiah 49:10). And before long, our hearts are resonating with the psalmist's prayer in Psalm 139:

*¹³ For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.*

By the Spirit of God, through the Word of God being taught, we begin to see ourselves as God saw us before we were even born. Don't miss how obedience to the Great Commission—disciple making—inevitably leads us to treasure the sanctity of human life. And not just in children, but amidst a whole host of issues in the world where people made in the image of God are prone to be marginalized, oppressed, mistreated or ignored.

One of the things I appreciate most about this conference is the zeal for addressing the issue of abortion, as well as seeing the sanctity of life in so many other spheres. Because as we obey the Great Commission, we begin to see, not just the unborn as God sees them, we begin to see the enslaved as God sees them.

I think about standing in Thailand recently, seeing the human trafficking industry up close and personal. Young girls trafficked for sex. And young boys are trafficked for fishing industries, where they're taken out to sea and made to work until they can't anymore, then just thrown overboard. With the Great Commission before us, we refuse to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that is not happening.

As we obey the Great Commission, we begin to see the immigrant and the refugee as God sees them—not as problems to be solved but as people to be loved. The Great Commission compels us to see the dignity of every person, to decry all forms of oppression, exploitation, bigotry, harassment of anybody, regardless of where they are from—or what they look like.

One thing we've talked about here is the fact—not an opinion—that instead of bridging the racial divide in our country, churches have historically widened and are currently widening the racial divide in our country. The church remains one of the most segregated institutions in our culture. Over 95% of white Americans attend predominately white churches; over 90% of African-Americans attend predominately black churches. Ever since the Civil War, churches have not only not bridged the racial divide in our country, every single week we are actually reinforcing that divide. The Great Commission compels us to change that, to make disciples of all the nations, deliberately, across cultures. It should be clear that what unites us in the church is not ethnicity, political party, economic parity or social preference. What unites us in the church is the gospel of Jesus Christ. I praise God for His grace in this church. People from over 100 different nations gather in this place on Sundays, from all kinds of different economic situations, with all sorts of political persuasions. From the Democratic reporter to the elected Republican—people who would be on opposite sides of various spectrums—but they're sitting right next to each other in worship of the one true God, with His Word open, saying, "How can we obey all that Jesus has commanded us to do?" The Great Commission transforms the way we view our lives and the lives of those around us.

The Great Commission also compels us to go to people who are far from us. Jesus said, "Make disciples, not just where you live, but make disciples of all the nations, among all the *ethne*—all the people groups of the world." So don't stop in your culture; go across cultures. Go to Thailand in the heart of the trafficking industry. Go to Syria, to Yemen, to surrounding countries in the Middle East. Go to Europe, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, where refugees are fleeing. Stop spending time debating how many refugees can come here and start spending more time in the church considering how many of us can go there.

I was standing in northern Uganda a few months ago among followers of Jesus who were working in refugee camps. These refugees were fleeing from war in Sudan and South Sudan, from poverty and oppression in the Central African Republic. Their many needs are great opportunities for the spread of the gospel. I was visiting camps in Europe. One Syrian woman said, "I'm tired of being tied to

a religion that doesn't offer me hope. I want to be a new person." She and her husband and their friend all placed their faith in Christ that day and were baptized outside the camp.

Two Kurdish brothers whose family had been killed by radicals in Iraq, including their parents right in front of their eyes, straight up said, "We want to know how we can follow Jesus." A Palestinian-born man was standing in line for water; he was raised in Syria because of conflict in Palestine. Just think about his life—fleeing from conflict in Palestine and now fleeing from civil war in Syria. He was separated from his wife and kids, not sure if or when he will ever reunite with them. But when he saw a follower of Jesus distributing water, he pulled him aside and asked him two questions. His first question was "Do you speak Arabic?" To which the man answered, "Yes." His second question was this: "Can you tell me how to become a Christian?" I received a text one day about eight new believers being baptized in one refugee camp.

Do you see the need and opportunity to go and make disciples of all the nations in a world of urgent need? So when it comes to abortion, let's go to China where historic child restrictions have led to multiplied abortions. Let's go to India where gender discrimination has led to the discarding of baby girls. Let's go to Greenland where some estimate abortions now outnumber actual births.

Go to the nations, proclaiming the gospel—the good news of the one Creator God Who made us, formed us, rules us, reigns over us, but against Whom we have rebelled. Tell them that He loves us and has made a way for us to live forever with Him. Tell them that He values life—eternal life. Go and proclaim this good news, gathering believers together into close-knit communities where they care for one another, teach one another and together display the power of the gospel to the world around them.

I think of visiting church leaders in the Himalayas, in remote places where the gospel had never gone before. I heard people describe how the gospel came, when a church was planted and the effect of that church on the culture around them, on the value of life in the people around them. Do we realize that obedience to the Great Commission has massive implications for social transformation?

After more than a decade of research on the effect of missionaries on the health of nations, a sociologist named Robert Woodbury came to the conclusion, "The work of missionaries turns out to be the single largest factor in ensuring the health of nations." Woodbury contrasted the work of what he labelled "conversionary Protestant missionaries" with Protestant clergy financed by the state. He observed, "Areas where Protestant missionaries (people who proclaimed the gospel with the goal of leading people to Jesus) have had significant presence in the past are, on average, more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment—especially for women—and more robust membership in non-governmental associations."

In Woodbury's words, those conclusions landed on him like an atomic bomb. We shouldn't be surprised by Woodbury's findings, for we know the fruit of faithful disciple-making—people coming to

Christ and being reconciled to a relationship with God—is inevitable transformation of lives, families and the people around them.

If that is true, we cannot keep this good news to ourselves. We cannot be content to sit back as casual cultural Christians to spend the majority of our Christian lives as spectators in services that cater to our comforts—giving offerings, the majority of which are used on places for us to meet, professionals to do ministry, programs that revolve around us and our preferences. That is not New Testament Christianity and it is not God’s design for the church. He has not called any one of us to come, be baptized and sit in one location. He has commanded every one of us to go, baptize and make disciples of all the nations, nations that are filled with impoverished communities, abandoned orphans, lonely widows and over 100,000 babies dying in the womb every single day.

So let’s do something. You say, “What shall I do?” The answer is: do what Jesus has told us to do: *“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.”* Through our obedience to this commission from Christ, among many other things, the nations will see the compassion of Christ for unwanted children.

Let me close with a story of a couple here in this church—Naomi and Dr. Z. Both are originally from Ethiopia, but they met and married here in the States. They were living a comfortable Christian spin on the American dream, until one day they decided to travel back to Ethiopia. While they were there vacationing, enjoying the resorts, a family member who lived there invited them to visit an orphanage with her. So they went to this orphanage and their lives were totally changed that day. For the first time, their eyes were opened to the needs of five million orphans and vulnerable children in Ethiopia—a massive crisis which I also saw this last summer. They immediately began to discuss adoption, a process that eventually led them to twin boys, but they knew God was calling them to more. So they began to mobilize this church to act. They came back and said to us, “We need to do something.” Now, three years after that initial visit back to Ethiopia for a vacation, a coalition of hundreds of churches in Ethiopia has been formed. A partner network has been created to provide for street children, private institutions, government institutions, foster care and adoption processes in Ethiopia.

As just one practical outworking of this, there is one government orphanage we were in last summer that had been seeing three to five children die every single week. But as a result of the work of Naomi and Dr. Z and the coalition of churches they have worked to create in Ethiopia, that government orphanage over the last six months saw only one child die.

When followers of Jesus go with the power of the gospel in their hearts, they do what Jesus commanded us to do, lives and communities and churches are changed, children are cared for and God is glorified in ways far beyond what we could ask or imagine. Naomi sent me a note recently saying, “If somebody had told me a couple years ago this is what my life would look like now, I would have laughed

and called them crazy. Looking back at how vulnerable children in Ethiopia caused my life to change can only be attributed to God, Who touched my heart in ways beyond my understanding.”

So I encourage you as you listen, as you think through these things, do not underestimate what God desires to do in your life, through your life, right where you’re sitting now, in the lives of men, women and children as you obey the Great Commission. Don’t underestimate what faithfulness to this command will bring about when it comes to fruit in this world.

Let’s pray.

God, we praise You for the life You have given to us. We praise You for the way You have formed us in Your image, in Your likeness, for the privilege of being in relationship with You. We praise You for saving us from our sin. We praise You for giving us new life. And so we pray, O God, in this world of urgent need around us, that You would use our lives to go and proclaim life in Christ through the power of the gospel. Use us to proclaim life, then to show Your value for life.

I look across this room at the individuals in here and I just pray that You would lead, guide and direct their steps to however they can most faithfully make disciples of the nations, and in the process to do it with a view toward those in need here and around the world—whether it’s the unborn, the enslaved, the trafficked or the oppressed. God, please make us the church You desire for us to be in this world. God, I pray Ephesians 3:20-21 over the brothers and sisters in this room right now. I pray that in the days to come, You would do in and through them immeasurably more than all they could ask or imagine, for Your name’s sake, with the power of Your gospel, in obedience to Your commission. God, I pray it would be so in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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