

In 1990, I was ordained an Elder by Bishop Susan Morrison. She was ordained an Elder by Bishop Kenneth Matthews. And he was ordained an Elder by Bishop Brenton Badley. I know those facts because Bishop Morrison gave me a document that is printed in beautiful calligraphy, tracing my ordination lineage back through bishop after bishop to Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury, and finally John Potter, the Archbishop of Canterbury who ordained John Wesley. As each of us was ordained, we were told in the liturgy to *“take authority as an Elder to proclaim the Word of God, to administer the holy sacraments, and to order the life of the Church.”*

The phrase *“take authority”* comes out of the Great Commission Matthew records in chapter 28 of his gospel. In those words, Jesus said *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.”* He then passed on that authority to His disciples, telling them to *“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*

From the beginning of the Church, two important teachings have been proclaimed about the Great Commission. First, it has been taught that Jesus did not intend the Great Commission to be limited to 12 disciples. Second, it has been taught that Jesus did not intend the Great Commission to be limited to those who have been ordained to *“proclaim the Word of God, to administer the holy sacraments, and to order the life of the Church.”* These two things have been taught because the words Jesus proclaimed in numerous other places in the gospels imply that every Christian has been given the Great Commission to *“make disciples,”* teaching those around them how to obey Jesus’ commands. We see this in the passage from Luke.

In chapter after chapter in Luke, we are told how Jesus moved around Israel to make disciples, teaching them the things they needed to obey to be in relationship with God. As He did so, He was accompanied by 12 disciples. In chapter 10, we are told Jesus *“appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of Him to every town and place where He was about to go.”* But they weren’t sent out for no reason. They were given a very specific mission: *“heal the sick”* and *“tell them, ‘the kingdom of God is near you.’”* To impress on the 72 the magnitude of what He was calling them to do, Jesus also told them *“whoever listens to you listens to Me; whoever rejects you rejects Me; and whoever rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.”*

In that statement, we see that it was the intent of Jesus that these 72 “other” disciples would join the 12 in the mission to *“make disciples,”* teaching those they spoke with how to obey His commands so they too could be in relationship with God. We also see that if participation in the work of salvation extended to those additional 72 disciples, it also extends to us. This is why Paul wrote in Romans 10 *“how, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”* For Paul understood that it was not the intent of Jesus that the call to *“make disciples”* would be limited to a select few - whether 12, or 72, or even to those who have been ordained to *“proclaim the Word of God, to administer the holy sacraments, and to order the life of the Church.”*

In the passage from Corinthians, we see this stated by Paul as he shared the implications of this belief with those in the early church. Paul had been called by Jesus to take the gospel message to the Gentiles. One way he did that was through missionary journeys. On one of those journeys, he went to Corinth. Numerous people in Corinth responded, and became followers of Jesus. Even though he was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul himself was Jewish. In various places, he therefore showed that he had a fondness for his people, and wanted to make sure that they too were saved. He also lamented the fact that the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, the place where Christian faith began, were persecuted, and as a result, destitute. That led Paul to ask the Gentiles around the Mediterranean to take up a collection.

In the passage before us, Paul explained that such an offering was more than just fund-raising. He did so by wrapping his words about the need of the Christians in Jerusalem in a teaching about stewardship, and by then wrapping his teaching about stewardship in an explanation of how each Christian is called (through stewardship) to participate in the Great Commission. After speaking about the offering, and how he was going to send people to Corinth to help them with the logistics of taking such a collection, Paul therefore goes on to say that *“your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”* What Paul was saying in those words is that their financial gifts would enable those around them, and especially those in Jerusalem, to see God at work in them, and in seeing God at work in them people would be prodded to give God thanks.

Paul then said that through such an offering *“men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”* What Paul was saying in those words was that their act - not just of taking an offering, but doing so because they had become generous souls - would impress people spiritually because such an act would show that their *“confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ,”* was genuine and not meaningless words.

Finally, Paul said that *“in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.”* What Paul was saying in those words was that as people were impressed spiritually, they would respond in such a way that they would not only follow Jesus, but would do so together with those who served as an example through their giving, as their acts of generosity would have become part of the work of the Great Commission in action. James said something similar when He wrote *“show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”* And both Paul and James got their ideas from Jesus, who said *“every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. [For] a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Thus, by your fruit you will recognize them.”*

Jesus does not call us to strive to carry out the Great Commission only to save others however. He also calls us to be His witnesses so we might be saved. This is because we cannot *“make disciples”* or teach them to obey what Jesus commanded if we are not - first and foremost - also seeking to be a disciple of Jesus and obeying what He commanded. We see this in Luke when Jesus sent out *“seventy-two others.”* Note that phrase, however: seventy-two others. Seventy-two other what? Seventy-two other disciples. For according to what Jesus said in other places in the gospels, a

disciple is a person who has laid down their life and picked up their cross, a person who seeks first His kingdom and His righteousness, a person who lives by His commands - even when it involves loving one's enemies, going the second mile, and turning the other cheek.

So as these seventy-two others disciples were sent out by Jesus to "*heal the sick*" and "*tell them, 'the kingdom of God is near you,'*" His intent wasn't just so unnamed others might enter into relationship with God, but also so that those seventy-two disciples might continue to grow in their own relationship with God. We see this reality recorded by Luke when the seventy-two "other" disciples returned from their mission. Luke tells us they "*returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'*" For Jesus replied by saying "*do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*"

In the passage from Corinthians, we hear Paul say something similar. In verse 6 Paul says "*remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*" His point was that as they gave generously toward the need of fellow believers in Jerusalem, God would give generously to them in all kinds of spiritual ways. Which is why Paul then says "*this service that you perform is [therefore] not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ.*" And this will result, Paul said, in "*the surpassing grace God*" being given to them in increasing measure.

As we think about such passages of scripture on Financial Commitment Sunday, they tell us two things. First, they tell us we need to realize that God not only calls us to be generous with our financial blessings so others can be enabled to come into relationship with God, but also so WE can continue to be enabled to be in relationship with God, and continue to grow in that relationship over time. Second, they tell us we need to carry out the Great Commission in each opportunity where an act of possible stewardship presents itself.

This doesn't mean that we have to say "yes" to every need we see. That is impossible. There will always be more needs around us than we could ever meet. But as we go through each day, we are called - as fully as possible - to allow God to work IN us and THROUGH us by what we do as disciples of Jesus - and this includes allowing God access to our time, talents, and treasure. For when we live in generous ways, we will see what Jesus was describing when the seventy-two came back from their mission and He said "*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.*"

To see how have we witnessed Satan "*fall like lightning from heaven*" here at Christ UMC, I could give you many examples, but I'll give you just one. Each week, we have people gather at our church, or one of several other churches in our community. They are then joined by people who have gone to Bristol to pick up food being donated by the Amish Market. The food is boxed up, along with food collected from Wawa, and then delivered to those in need. As that happens, people in need are given the food they need, and God is offered thanks as a result - just as Paul said in the Corinthian passage.

But even more importantly, as Jesus said in the gospel passage, such work allows us to rejoice not just that the Prince of Demons is made to submit to the name of Jesus, and figuratively “*fall like lightning from heaven*” in the lives of those around us, we are also able to ensure that our names are written in the book of life. For while we are not saved by our works, what we do as we live out each day certainly displays whether or not our heart has been touched by God. This is what Jesus meant when He said “*where your treasure is, there your heart shall be as well.*”

I invite you to ponder all this, and to talk to God about how He would have you serve Him as a Great Commission disciple in 2019 (through your financial commitment to Him through your church, as well as your mission and ministry activities inside and outside the church), as we watch a video about the Amish Market Ministry.