Great Commission April 16, 2023

+ Greatest Commandment

**Bible Verses:** Matthew 28:16-20 + Mark 12:28-34

**Spark Story Bible:** pages 496 to 499 + pages 308 to 311

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Overall Lesson Takeaways

* **What are we called to do as Jesus’ disciples?**

Part of the reason that we are combining these two short passages from the Gospels (in addition to giving you more to work with in your lesson) is that they both deal with this same fundamental question of what our call is as Jesus’ disciples. Jesus’ astonishingly simple (yet difficult – see below) summary of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures is an excellent foundation for what we aspire to as disciples – and the Great Commission helps us to think and dream bigger, reminding us of the ways in which our actions have an effect on not just our communities, but our wider world as well. Part of being a disciple, then, is bringing that sort of mindfulness to our actions and relationships – and reconnecting with this sense of purpose during the season of Eastertide helps place us with those earliest disciples as they began to wrap their minds around what it would mean for them to become the church.

* **Loving God and loving neighbor: easy or hard?**

As noted above, Jesus’ reduction of the commandments from 613 to 2 is an incredible feat – but we should never mistake their simplicity for being simple. Loving God and neighbor sounds like an easy thing to hold to, but what happens when we find ourselves with difficult choices to make: choices around our time, our presence, our money, or our mental energy? Time and time again, we will be challenged about what we put first – and sometimes that will mean having to make decisions that go against what others are doing. “Loving God and loving neighbor – it’s all that easy and it’s all that hard” is a common refrain in many church communities… but it’s the truth! For many of us, we will be learning how to do those two things our entire life long – but it all starts with what we practice as kids.

* **Embracing a bigger vision of God’s kingdom.**

Jesus gave the Great Commission to the disciples not because he wanted them to force other people to become his followers, but because he knew that God’s kingdom would not be complete if it only involved those in/around Israel. Seeing all people as part of God’s family – and embracing our call to show love to them – is our responsibility as disciples no matter what culture or religion they are a part of. Jesus’ words are an invitation to be curious and compassionate towards others, demonstrating the power of our faith not through coercing but through serving.

Checking In

**Before the reading:**

* **Check in with the kids – welcoming any newcomers warmly.**
	+ Younger kids: What is the farthest you’ve ever travelled?
	+ Older kids: Highs and Lows from the past week
* **We have two passages today – one in which Jesus helps summarize what he has come to teach, and one in which Jesus sends the disciples out into the world. What is a place that you’d love to travel to?**

Bible Lesson / Discussion

**Reading the Bible:**

* Both our passages today help us understand what it really means to be a disciple – which is important since every one of us makes up the church!
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!

**Questions About the Passages** (see next page for PreK/K questions)

* Jesus summarized the commandments as “loving God and loving your neighbor” – is there anything that you think would be important to add?
* How do you think the disciples felt after being given the responsibility to show others what it meant to be a disciple? Do you feel like you could teach others what it would mean?

**Connections to Our Lives**

* Is “loving God and loving our neighbor” something that is hard or easy to follow? When is it easy? When is it hard?
* St. Francis of Assisi once wrote: “Share the Gospel at all times. Use words when necessary.” How can our actions be an example of our faith in Jesus? When might it be necessary to use words?

**Biblical/Church Connections**

* We are now into the season of our church year called Eastertide, when the disciples were learning what it meant to be the church after Jesus left. What do you think are the most important things that the church does?

**Alternate Preschool and K/1st Questions**

Younger ages, particularly those in our preschool class, may have a hard time discussing the biblical text for very long (if at all). My hope is that these questions (and especially the activity) can help with engagement!

**Opening Questions / Activity**

* **Take some time to welcome / get to know the kids!**
	+ Today we are learning about two important messages Jesus gave to the disciples which help us understand what our job is as the church. What are things that you think the church should do?
	+ Jesus told the disciples that they should go everywhere in the world to spread his message – where would you really want to travel to?

**Warm Up Game – Teacher Says**

* Our Bible passages today are about Jesus sharing important messages for the disciples to follow, so I thought it would be fun to play a game where we have to follow messages too: Teacher Says! (like Simon Says)
	+ Teacher says: Jump up and down
	+ Stop jumping. (Teacher didn’t say!)
	+ Teacher says: Hop on your left foot
	+ Teacher says: Hop on your right foot
	+ Teacher says: Give someone a hug
* Play as long as kids are having fun, then transition to the Bible questions.

**Bible Discussion/Questions**

* Our Bible stories are short, but important messages that Jesus shared with his disciples about how to spread God’s love all over the world.
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!
* Jesus shared that the two most important things we can do are to “love God and love other people”. What are ways that we can show love to God? What are ways we can show love to other people?
* Jesus gave the disciples a lot of responsibility for helping the church grow.

What does responsibility mean? What are some things that you are responsible for, whether at home or at school?

People of Faith

In addition to reading our weekly Bible story, I'd love for our older grade school students to learn more about people whose lives were changed by their faith in Jesus. We'll lift up a new person each Sunday, trying to connect their story to our Bible passage as much as possible!

**Kaitlin Curtice**

On a Sunday when we are learning about the ways that Jesus’ followers have been inspired to share the gospel around the world, we must also grapple with the ways in which it has been shared in hurtful and destructive ways – and the experience of the poet and author Kaitlin Curtice helps to give voice to that.

Curtice grew up in Shawnee, Oklahoma as part of the Potawatomi Nation – her father was of Potawatomi heritage, while her mother was of European descent. After her parents divorced when she was 9, however, she soon found herself cut off from her Potawatomi relatives, history, and culture – instead being immersed in the world of her mother’s Baptist church. She dove deeply into Christianity, carrying two Bibles with her wherever she went (in case a friend needed one) and she even posed with a Bible in her 5th grade portrait.

Over time, though, Curtice began to learn troubling things about the ways that Christians in the United States had treated her ancestors – such as the terrible “Trail of Death” when Native people were forced off their land. She learned that many Christians had forced Native American children to become Christians under the slogan “Kill the Indian, Save the Man”. She was saddened at the ways her faith had historically been used to hurt her cultural heritage – and she vowed to do something about it.

Curtice began to write and teach about the ways the church had harmed Native peoples, and to explain that becoming Christian did not mean that someone had to let go of his/her cultural identity. She spent a great deal of time learning more about the Potawatomi people, and she tries to bring that part of her identity into her faith. As Curtice says: “It’s time to remember that everyone belongs. As long as the church only wants what is White in me and not what is Native in me, there’s still more work to be done”.

Crafts / Activities

**Great Commission Thank You Card**

**(Ages 5+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Crayons/Markers/Colored Pencils

Instructions:

* Although these cards are specifically meant to be given to teachers, you can encourage the kids to rewrite these cards for anyone they want! Spreading God’s love through a kind word is part of being a disciple.

**Greatest Commandment Heart Find**

**(Ages 3+, 3-5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This picture find isn’t terribly complex, but younger students should enjoy looking for hearts hidden in the picture of Jesus and the disciples.

**Greatest Commandment Number Puzzle**

**(Ages 7+, 3-5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This number puzzle looks far more intimidating than it is – it’s essentially a connect-the-dot puzzle that requires you to draw lines between the listed numbers, revealing a heart at the center!

Biblical Background – Great Commission + Greatest Commandment[[1]](#footnote-2)

We’re cheating a little bit this week by combining two passages that don’t appear alongside one another in the biblical text – but they do both get at the heart of what it means to be Jesus’ disciple, and how we are called to live.

We’ll begin with the Greatest Commandment, the earlier pre-resurrection passage that has become famous as a summary of what Jesus’ ministry was all about. Jesus is asked by one of the religious leaders: “Which commandment is first of all?”– a question that seems genuine, even though it could also be construed as a trap. For context, the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) record 613 different commandment, so summarizing/ranking them is no small feat.

It should be noted, though, that Jesus is not the first to summarize them. Even within the Old Testament, we see passages like Psalm 15, Micah 6:8, and others attempting this sort of succinct summarizing. Jesus, however, lifts up two from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 – ‘*love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength’*, and ‘*love your neighbor as yourself’*. Being Jesus’ disciple is as easy – and as hard! – as following those simple commands.

This core mission of loving God and neighbor, then, is also seen in the words of the “Great Commission” – the words which close the Gospel of Matthew. In Jesus’ final address, he sends the disciples out from Jerusalem into the wider world with this charge to “make disciples of all nations”. That phrase has been tragically abused over the centuries – and 21st century Christians should recognize and condemn the widespread history of forced conversions, cultural assimilation, and missionary work that looked to subdue rather than support.

It should go without saying – but say it we must – that Jesus never did or advocated for anything like the aggressive, expansionist Christianity that came out of a mingling of the church with political power. Instead, Jesus’ commission should more rightly be read as an invitation to share the Gospel through one’s life and actions – loving God and neighbor because that is core to who we are. Jesus’ words are a reminder that God’s kingdom belongs to all people, not a command that we force the entire world to become Christian.

1. Your ability to share this info with kids will vary depending on their age – this section is mainly written for teachers and parents to learn a bit more about the background to each week's passage! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)