



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Our Hope Is Built on Nothing Less

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ JULY 2, 2023

Once again, we have the opportunity and the joy of celebrating the birth of the nation we love. In the next few days, we will look back and celebrate the heritage of a nation unlike any other. I am one who celebrates what is good about our heritage without apology. At the same time, my conscience does mourn her errors, but I recognize that if we are honest about those errors, they do not negate all that is good. I believe that 247 years after its founding, the United States still represents many things that impact the world for good. God has blessed this nation with untold resources and opportunities, and some of the greatest thoughts from humanity originated here. At the same time, my heart aches because of our current struggles, brokenness, rising vitriol, and unfaithfulness to One Almighty God, which adversely affects the nation we love. What do we do about it?

I believe the answer lies in this familiar scripture passage that we have labeled the “Great Commission.” You all could probably quote it back to me, but I invite you to listen to it, perhaps for the first time, but certainly today with different ears.

Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Matthew 16:18-20 (NASB 1995)

I am a fan of the “good old” hymns of the church. One of my favorites is *My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less*, because it speaks of what I have come to embrace as my ultimate hope: “Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Certainly, I rely on Jesus Christ for my eternal salvation, which is a big part of what the gospel is all about, but I also entrust my life here on earth, my family, my church, our nation, and the world for that matter, to Him, to His sovereign love and purpose. For He is the King of kings. He is the Lord of lords. Some of the Scriptures that help seal this trust in my own soul are when Jesus says, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). And Paul says, “...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13). Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

Since the beginning of the Christian era, throughout the world at different times and places, faith in Jesus Christ has flourished, and at other times it has diminished. There have been times of great revival and there have been times of severe trials, persecution, and attempts to snuff out the church. Yet 2,000 years later, the Church is still here. And as we speak, the number of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ around the world is unprecedented. There are places in the world today that historically have not been centers of Christian growth, but where the gospel is being spread like wildfire. People are coming to faith in places like Iran, communist China, India, Africa, Central and South America! The gospel is exploding all over the world! By contrast, here in the Western hemisphere, church leaders have been telling us for several years that we now live in a post-Christian era. Why would that be? What happened?

I submit that one of the reasons is that the advocates of the non-Christian worldview have done a better job and been more effective in evangelism for the non-Christian views than the Christians have for the Christian worldview. Using the means of communication, education, entertainment, advertising, the media, and the gradual

breakdown of the family unit, the moral-ethical consensus that we, in general, have a Judeo-Christian worldview has eroded. With what has that consensus been replaced? What are the influences that have shaped the lack of consensus? It is hard for us to hear, but the culture we have now is what we have allowed and made it to be. As Scripture says, *"...whatever a man sows, this he will also reap"* (Galatians 6:7).

I take courage in the fact that we regularly say, "America is the land of opportunity." We usually think of that in terms of an opportunity to make a living and have a good life. That is true, but in addition to that we have the unprecedented blessing of the free exercise of religion and freedom to spread the Christian faith. It would seem that in this land of opportunity with the ability to speak freely, the Christian faith would grow by leaps and bounds. This is a land of opportunity for the church as well. But there are many reasons why we have experienced an avalanche of moral and ethical challenges. We have our work cut out for us, don't we?

In the first place, we have embraced as a whole culture the belief that there is no absolute truth; that truth is whatever any individual wants to think it is. We have abandoned truth for a "pseudo-unity" which we have not achieved. Second, we have allowed ourselves to embrace the proposition that faith or the practice of religion is a private thing, so it does not belong in the public square. We have abandoned the zeal for evangelism and for sharing the gospel. As a result, we have created a culture in which we tend to accept everything and are thus grounded in very little. The result is moral anarchy, weakness of character, rising violence, and a bewildered youth.

But not all is bad news. Lest we think there is no hope, that our country keeps moving in a direction we cannot change and we don't know what to do about it, remember what Jesus said. When we are wrestling with any question, we should always ask ourselves, "What did Jesus say about this?" First, He said that He is the truth! This tells us that there is such a thing as truth and that it is discernible to the extent that one knows Him. If you want to know the truth, get to know Him because He is the truth! (John 14:6).

Second, He taught us to be the light and salt of the world and not to hide our light under a bushel (Matthew 5:15)—which, by the way, the advocates of the non-Christian worldview certainly do not do. They do not hide their supposed lamp under a bushel and have no problem spreading all their views and trying to influence us. Jesus taught us to go into all the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19).

Given the sum of the myths that are accepted about our nation which might cause angst, think of it as the theologian Abraham Kuyper once wrote: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” Is He sovereign or not? Is He the Lord of lords and King of kings, or not?

It has also been said that when you are a Christian and profess that God is Almighty, there is no single area of life from which you can eliminate God. Someone might object to this saying that Jesus himself said, “...render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). You might think it implies that there are two different realms and never the twain shall meet, but what possibly could belong to Caesar that doesn’t already belong to God? Jesus’ statement is rhetorical: it helps us recognize that all things already belong to God and we are to be stewards of those things; we use them to be good citizens in whatever situation we find ourselves. Psalm 24:1 says, “*The earth is the LORD’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.*” The reason Jesus wants us to go into the world to make disciples is, first, to build His Kingdom to ensure eternal salvation for others so they can have the joy of a Christian life just as we do. The Holy Spirit will not fail in His intent! We can go out encouraged because we were sent by the One who has all authority!

Second, Jesus did not teach us only about heaven. Most of His teaching had to do with how to live on this earth and how to relate to one another. An essential principle is that in order to change the culture or the world, change the people! Even the worst tyrants in history

understood this principle and put it into practice for evil purposes. If the hearts and minds of people change, the culture and character of leadership changes. Particular attention must be paid to reaching young people and children because they are not only the future, they are also the most vulnerable and impressionable. In Proverbs 22:6 we read, *“Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”*

What does it mean to be a “disciple”? Notice that Jesus did not say to get people to join a church or force them to agree with a set of propositions. He said to *make* disciples. What is a “disciple”? First, disciples of Jesus recognize that their life is not their own. Their lives have been paid for at a great price. Their lives belong to Him and He is free to do with them as He pleases. This means He has authority; He is not only our Savior but the Lord of our lives.

He is my sovereign Lord. Every nook and cranny of my life belongs to Him and is shaped by Him. We are called to spend our lives trying to become more in His likeness. Everything we think, everything we hope for, everything we dream, our entertainment, our relationships (both casual and deep), our attitudes, everything about who we are is to be shaped by Him. We are not just to tag along behind Jesus—that is being a follower. We are to be disciples. Our lives are to be shaped by Him! Jesus calls us to impact people’s lives and help them become disciples. The simple fact of the matter is the more people are transformed into the likeness of Jesus, the greater impact the Way, the Truth, and the Life will have on the culture.

A reporter once asked a lady who was protesting why she wanted to make something illegal. The woman responded, “I don’t want to make it illegal; I want to make it unthinkable.” Her point was, why in the world would we want to do this in the first place? Where are people’s hearts that they would want to do this? This is a lady who gets it. She was not looking to the government to determine whether something was legal or illegal, but what was in people’s hearts.

Things get tricky when the faith community seeks to impact the public square in the United States. The nature of our republic includes being a pluralistic, open society. Respecting that the government's role is to protect the free exercise of religion, but it is not the government's role to do the church's work. That is up to us. Should we force the Christian worldview in the United States? Not at all! That would be contradictory to our principles of freedom. But we do not have to because the Gospel has its own appeal and its own power. Jesus does not want people forced to follow Him. He wants transformed and willing hearts. Jesus' method is evangelism—make disciples! Because this is Jesus' call, He will accomplish it.

We must trust the Holy Spirit's power to bring our efforts to fruition. He has done it before! From the conversion of the Roman Empire to the Reformation, the Great Awakening in North America, and in many other cases all around the world, God has moved in mighty ways! We must earnestly pray that He will move in a mighty way once again **in the United States**. He is truly our only hope. We must never fall into the classic heresy by believing that humanity can grow holy and spotless, secure God's grace, and attain salvation by an act of our own free will. We cannot do this without His help. That is why the Founders added to our Declaration of Independence, "With a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence." Our founders understood that without Him they would not be successful in their efforts.

It is interesting that at the very First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, the first thing the delegates decided to do was to have a worship service. They recognized that their efforts would be for naught without God's blessing, without His guidance, and without His help. Then at the Constitutional Congress the delegates initially were not making any progress. It was Benjamin Franklin who voiced his concern to the Moderator, President George Washington, by saying, "Sir, ...the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men." He went on to say that all through this latest conflict they had been meeting and praying for

God's Providence and blessing on their efforts to gain independence. How could they expect to succeed with a new Constitution without God's help? Franklin proposed that they begin each session in writing this Constitution with prayer.

The unique challenges for the United States can be illustrated in two examples. Do you remember about 20 years ago when there was a hullabaloo in America about whether the Ten Commandments should be displayed in public places? One side of the argument was that governmental authority should be used to take the Ten Commandments down, and the other side of the argument was that governmental authority should be used to either put them back up or to leave them up. But just like the lady who was protesting, that's the wrong question. The question that should have been asked was why would we want to take them down in the first place? What was the worldview of the people who put them up and what now is the worldview of the people who want to take them down? We can argue all day about whether the government should be involved; but what has happened to us as a people?

In Acts 17:6 (ESV) the disciples showed up in Thessalonica and one person remarked, *"These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."* The men who had turned the world upside down had come, and their preaching was totally changing everything. Actually, they were not turning the world upside down; they were returning it right side up. They could see the impact that their preaching was having on the population. It was changing them in the way they were living and the way they were thinking.

Back in the '60s, at the height of the Cold War, one of my professors from McCormick Seminary was doing research in Germany and had to pass into East Germany through a security checkpoint. The East German guards thoroughly searched his car and his briefcase. The guards confiscated one thing: his Bible. They were thrilled that they were able to find it and confiscate it because they were an atheistic communist country and didn't want this Christian professor to come

into their country with a Bible and change things. I remember the point that Dr. Dudley made to us: "I wish that Christians had as much faith in the power of this book, as did those atheist guards."

We must expect to face opposition. Look what was done to Jesus. But Jesus overcame that opposition by sacrificial love and by the Resurrection. So, too, did the early church, ministering in a decidedly pagan culture. Jesus started with just 12 men. And He even lost one of those! Nevertheless, because of these men the world has been immeasurably changed. The world has never been the same. Theologian Charles Hodge said,

The acts of the wicked in persecuting the early church were ordained of God as the means for the wider and more speedy proclamation of the gospel. The sufferings of the martyrs were the means not only for extending but also for purifying the church.

We must be willing to step out of our comfort zone and to endure opposition, trusting in Jesus' promises and visions of His complete victory in the end times. Be encouraged by today's Scripture reading of the disciples preaching in Jerusalem in Acts 5:12, "*...they were all with one accord...*" and verse 14 continues, "*...multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number*" they made such an impact. Once again, the priests thought these men were turning the world upside down (or more accurately, right side up), and the leaders had them arrested and put in a public jail. Then an angel enabled them to escape, and told them in verse 20, "*Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.*" In other words, go preach some more.

This was like what Jeremiah went through when he preached. The people would throw him into the cistern and he'd go back to God and ask, "Now what should I do?" God would tell him to go preach some more. He was whipped and put in the stocks, and again he asked God what to do, and again God told him to preach some more. That is exactly what the disciples were doing.

We pick up the story where the disciples are detained for a second time, as the story continues in Acts 5:27-32.

When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. ³¹He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

They were given strict orders not to preach. Why? Because their message was having an impact on Jerusalem. Peter's response was, "That's the whole point. We must obey God rather than man." He proceeded to tell them the Gospel.

The leaders wondered what to do about the disciples, and Gamaliel reminded them that other men had come along twice in the past and stirred things up, but they had perished and their cause had faded away. Acts 5:38-39 continues:

I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

The truth prevails. The Church is a manifestation of that kingdom and is still here 2,000 years later. What happened to the mighty Roman Empire? They tried so hard to snuff out the Way and, yet, 2,000 years later, here we are. Gamaliel was right.

Let's look at Acts 5:40-42.

...they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. ⁴¹So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. ⁴²And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Satan has targets on your pastors' backs, on your elders' backs, on your deacons' backs, and on your backs. Satan hates what this church is doing. Lives are being changed. Because the disciples kept right on preaching is probably the reason you are all here. They took Jesus at His word.

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:18-20

What is the implication of everything that I have shared this morning? What I see is the hope of this nation that we love. That hope for the United States is found in the restoration and maturing of its soul. The downward spiral of our culture will continue until God's churches make evangelism of the highest priority. But even our best efforts will come to nothing unless the Holy Spirit empowers and blesses those efforts. Our efforts must reflect Jesus' way rather than our way, and we must resolve to speak the truth in love.

We need to earnestly pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a revival in this country; otherwise, we will continue down this road. Paraphrasing the church's mission as shared by my dear friend and mentor Dr. Harry Reeder, one of my professors and a brother in Christ who the Lord recently called home: The church is not called to change the culture; the church is called to change sinners into disciples of Jesus, who then will go into the world and change the culture.

If the church as an institution tries to change the culture it will miss what Jesus told us to do; He said, “Make disciples.” We are God’s instrument in changing sinners into disciples. The disciples then go out into the world and they change the culture. They are the ones who turn the world right side up. How far into the spiritual wilderness must we go before we as a people, many for the first time, turn to God? We must call our beloved United States of America to prayer and to repentance. We must boldly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ with patience, with respect, with love, and perseverance. We must not only speak the truth but live it, showing our fellow citizens that there is a better way—a way of sacrificial love and service and patient understanding. We must have the courage to speak the Lord’s truth without compromise: not to tear down or to injure but to build up. God’s way is the best way.

When Christ returns and establishes His everlasting Kingdom for all time, all will be made right, His justice and peace and righteousness will be complete. In the meantime, get your hearts and minds around this principle: The work of the church is the most important work in the world. To the extent that the church will be faithful in calling our American population to Christ, speaking the truth in love, and relying on the providential power of the Holy Spirit, I believe that America’s best days are still to come! ■