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The Great Omission

I remember the exciting days in seminary when veteran missionaries would come to speak in the chapel services, telling of the great challenges of taking the gospel to every tribe and tongue and nation. Our hearts would pound with the anticipation of being sent out to some remote corner of the earth to do our part in fulfilling the Great Commission. It made us want to study harder and finish with high marks so as to be most attractive to the leading missions organizations, such as *Wycliffe* and *Youth with a Mission*. We imagined that there, on the mission field, was the place to serve God in the most radical, whole-hearted manner possible.

In our idealistic zeal, some of us dared to ask uncomfortable questions as we puzzled over things in the scriptures that didn't seem to match up with what we were seeing and hearing. Especially problematic was the Great Commission itself:

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 obey all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

We heard a lot about the "Go" part. That was exciting. The world was a big place, full of opportunities. And we heard a lot about the "make disciples" part — how to make the gospel clear and simple, so that we could get to the "baptizing them" part. That's what got people excited in the churches back home, giving them confidence to keep supporting the work with their tithes and offerings. But when it came to the "teaching them" part, something was missing.

Oh, there was certainly no lack of teaching materials being developed for the mission field, but the emphasis was on teaching Christian doctrine and moral principles. Somehow the "obey all that I have commanded you" part never got much attention. That was the uncomfortable part. It was more encouraging to skip to the "lo, I am with you always" part, and

think about Jesus coming back as soon as we could get the gospel to all the remote corners of the earth.

But, try as I might, I could not escape that nagging question: What about all the things Jesus commanded *them*, His first disciples? After all, that was who He was speaking to, wasn't it? Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the others. What had He commanded *them*? Deep inside I sensed that the reason it was an uncomfortable subject in seminary was because we could hardly teach anyone else to obey what we ourselves had not obeyed.

For starters, I was haunted by the way it all began for those first disciples:

And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." They immediately left their nets and followed Him.

Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (Matthew 4:18-22)

It was the same for all of the twelve — they all left everything and followed the Master. Of course, we comforted ourselves with the excuse that we were going to serve the Lord full time, either as pastors or missionaries, but what about everyone else? We weren't about to command everyone to "leave their nets" to follow Him, unless they felt they were being called to the ministry. But that still didn't wash. Leaving everything behind had been the *starting point* for those first disciples, not a higher calling for the chosen few after they had been saved for awhile.

Even the twelve didn't realize that the call to discipleship was the same for everyone until one day a rich young man came running up to the Master and said, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹ He wasn't inquiring about going into the full-time ministry; he was asking for *eternal life*. That's why the Master's answer was so startling, not only to him, but also to the disciples:

¹ Mark 10:17

"Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:22-27)

You can see that the disciples were about to come into a greater understanding. It was not unusual in their day for a radical teacher to have a small, devoted group of disciples surrounding him, but this was entering into a different realm — *salvation itself was at stake.*

These poor fishermen could not imagine that rich people would give up everything to follow Yahshua, but He gently reminded them that there was a power beyond a man's own natural understanding that could lift him out of his lonely existence — that is, *faith*. Peter "got it" ...

Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you!"

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or wife or children or lands, for My sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time — houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions — and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mark 10:28-30)

There was no getting around it: forsaking one's life and possessions was not just a more radical step for the over-zealous few, but was the very starting point for anyone who would follow the Son of God. He couldn't have said it more clearly or emphatically than He did here:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate^a his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

And whoever does not take up his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

"Hate" in this verse is explained in Matthew 10:37-39 — "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

Likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26,27,33)

It is crystal clear, then, that the *first* thing Yahshua commanded His disciples was to forsake everything in order to follow Him, and upon that foundation of obedience He could give them more commandments. Unless they began with obedience, there was no point in commanding them to do anything else, for they would not be able to obey it anyway, being just natural men. As He had explained to the disciples, the faith that they had received to leave all and follow Him is what opened up to them the power to do the impossible,² for that is what set them apart as His special people to whom He could entrust Himself.

There were many who claimed to believe in Him, but He would not entrust Himself to them, for they would not entrust themselves to Him.³ They were excited to witness the miracles that He did, but were content to continue living their independent lives in the world. So how "in the world" could they obey His commandments? For example,

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:31-33)

How could a man not worry about how to provide for himself and his family? In those days, if a man did not labor diligently to wrest a living from the reluctant earth,⁴ he and his family would either starve or be reduced to beggars or slaves. How do you suppose Zebedee the fisherman felt when his two sons, James and John, suddenly left him to "seek first the kingdom of God" by following this itinerant preacher, Yahshua of Nazareth?⁵ How irresponsible! But they had come under the "God-spell," trusting that God was going to take care of them, somehow.

And take care of them He did, not by beggary or social welfare programs, but by the miracle of the love that was poured out in their hearts when they truly surrendered their lives

² Mark 10:27

³ In John 2:23-25, "believe" and "entrust" are exactly the same word in the original Greek text.

⁴ Genesis 3:17-19

⁵ Matthew 4:21-22

and clung together as commonwealth, looking after each other's needs and not their own.⁷

Their life together was the only context in which they could obey the "new commandment," which was the distinguishing mark of Yahshua's disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples. (John 13:34-35)

The greatest expression of obedience to this commandment is seen in the results of Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after the Master's resurrection:

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple courts, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

This was another passage that haunted me in seminary, and the attempts by my professors to explain it away didn't sit right with me. To me it was simple: Peter preached the same gospel that he himself had obeyed,⁸ and 3000 people responded in the very same way he had responded — they all gave up everything to follow Yahshua by following the apostles who had followed Yahshua.⁹ The result was a community — "all who believed were together and had all things in common."¹⁰

⁷ Philippians 2:4, NRSV (Other translations insert the words *merely* and *also*, which are not in the original Greek text, but make the verse much more comfortable.)

⁸ Mark 10:28

⁹ Acts 2:42

¹⁰ Acts 2:44

Obviously, Peter had simply obeyed the Great Commission: "make disciples ... teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." We don't have a record of everything Peter spoke to those who wanted to be saved, but only the assurance, "And with *many other words* he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'"^[1] Those who heeded these *many other words* were baptized and received the Holy Spirit, "whom God has given to those who obey Him."^[2] Their obedience resulted in the abundant life of love and unity that is so vividly recorded in the next few verses.

The Spirit they received empowered them to love one another just as their Savior had loved His first disciples, to whom He had given that *new* commandment: "Love one another just as I have loved you."^[3] How had He loved *them*? You must remember that He gave that commandment on the night before He was crucified. His disciples had been with Him night and day for the past three and a half years. They had experienced His tender care for them daily in countless ways, even to the point of Him washing their dirty feet that very evening, like a common servant. "Love one another just as I have loved you." What do you think His disciples understood when He said those words to them that night? How had He loved them? That is how they taught the 3000 to love one another: By laying down their lives for one another *every day*.^[4] The new commandment can mean nothing less.

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

Whoever has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and reveal Myself to him.

Whoever does not love Me does not keep My words. (John 14:15,21,24)

I did not learn this in seminary. I was not taught to fulfill the Great Commission, nor was I even able to do so, as I myself was a product of the Great *Omission*. I was not taught to obey His commandments. But since I was willing to obey them, the Father drew me to His

^[1] Acts 2:40

^[2] Acts 5:32

^[3] John 13:34

^[4] 1 John 3:14; Luke 9:23; Hebrews 3:13; Acts 2:46-47 (note the word *daily*)

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Son, that is, to the true Body of Messiah, where true disciples were obeying His commandments, laying down their lives for one another every day. There I heard the true gospel and was finally able to do what I had always wanted to do — become one of Yahshua's disciples by giving up everything and following Him. I have received His Holy Spirit, and I am learning how to love my brothers and sisters. As we learn to obey Him more and more, He is revealing Himself to us more and more, just as He promised.¹⁵ It is much better than seminary. It is eternal life!

¹⁵ John 14:21