

UNIT THREE: JESUS

SESSION ELEVEN: WHAT JESUS DID AND WHO HE IS

Summary of the Eleventh Session of the Course

Summaries of Jesus' Ministry

We read Matthew 4:23-25 which summarizes Jesus' ministry in three activities: *teaching* in the synagogues, *proclaiming* the good news of the kingdom, and *healing* people with all sorts of diseases, mental and physical. In the regular confirmation course, I had added one more: Jesus went about *forgiving* sinful people, although forgiving could be seen as a major form of healing.

Next, we read Mark 1:14,15, which offers a summary of Jesus' proclamation. We analyzed this short passage piece by piece.

"The time is fulfilled." The time has come for God to keep all the promises left unfulfilled and so answer the hopes of the faithful. It is time for God to come and act decisively. From a Christian viewpoint, the Old Testament ends with many unfulfilled promises and ongoing hopes. Jesus announces that the long-awaited time has come.

"And the kingdom of God has come near (or is at hand)." The kingdom of God is the reign of God. It is not a place with borders but a condition of life in which God's love and mercy rule over everything, with no opposition from us, among us, in the world, or even in nature. All evil is removed, and the desire for it is gone. In the kingdom, people will respond to God freely and honestly, trusting and even loving God. All of life will be as God wills it to be, without contradiction, but we will still be free. Justice will be done for those denied it, peace and wholeness (*shalom*) will reign, and righteousness will be the way of life. We recalled that, in the Bible, righteousness is a relational matter. Righteousness is not virtue or personal morality so much as it is right dealing within relationships. In the kingdom of God, human relations and relationships will be restored to wholeness and harmony – the harmony we saw destroyed in the story of humanity's rebellion against God (Genesis 3). Sin's alienation and hostility will be gone. God's grace will be our life and trust in God's grace our way of life.

This promised kingdom has now come near and is confronting people, requiring their response for or against it. God has come, and Jesus tells people God is right there facing them. The kingdom has now become a present and potent force in the world.

We discussed Matthew's use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven," in place of Mark and Luke's "kingdom of God." Matthew seems to have been written for Jewish people who considered the name "God" too holy for everyday use. This scruple still exists in some of modern Judaism. When we developed our community Thanksgiving services, one of the rabbis here in Bridgeton would print God as "G-d" in the program, to avoid spelling it out completely for the sake of reverence.

The danger to us in Matthew's use of the more Jewish terminology, "kingdom of heaven," comes because we think of heaven as a place other than earth where we go when we die. "Kingdom of heaven" ≠ (does not equal) heaven in that sense. "Kingdom of heaven" = "kingdom of God." We speak the same way, when we use "the White House" to refer to the President. Matthew's kingdom of heaven is still God's kingdom on earth. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), the younger son tells his father, "I have sinned against heaven and against you," meaning he has sinned against God as well as his own father. The kingdom of heaven does not refer to a place in the clouds nor to any place other than earth. It is God's reign on earth. It is the rule of God's grace. Over the centuries since the New Testament books were written, Christians have substituted heaven (as the place we go when we die) for the kingdom of God. So, our hope has been refocused on another place, another realm. We have learned to hope to get into heaven, but our hopes for this world have faded and, sometimes, even been scorned. Forget the world. The world has been consigned to destruction rather than held to God's desire for justice, peace, integrity, human dignity, and freedom.

For Jesus, this world is the place where the battle rages and must be won. He teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come; your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven." The gospel is good news for earth and its peoples. God means to transform life here and now. The kingdom of God is at hand.

"Repent, and believe in the good news." Repent means *turn* or *return*. Turn to God and to the kingdom of God which confronts you in the person, life, and ministry of Jesus. Want God and God's kingdom. Pray for the kingdom's coming. Get ready to receive it. Pin your hopes on it, and open yourself to it.

As repent means turn to God, it also implies turning away from everything that does not come from God and belong in God's kingdom: all the wasted, empty, destructive, and self-destructive habits, activities, and mind sets in which we human being become involved and to which we dedicate our plans and efforts. Jesus tells us we cannot serve both God and mammon (apparently, a god or personification of wealth, power, and luxury). Turn away from all that enslaves or degrades people, diminishes life, or turns people against each other.

Jesus puts the emphasis on turning *toward* – that is, turning toward God – rather than on turning *away from*. Christian preaching has often gone the other way by making repentance mean mostly (sometimes almost exclusively) turning away from sins. And even then, the emphasis has usually been on turning away from personal vices and sexual immoralities (or even just sex itself) rather than turning away from injustice, oppression, and the social evils that make life miserable for

so many in our world. Seldom have we called people to repent by turning away from power and the love of personal success. Jesus' contrast between God and mammon seems most often missed by his church. So, the churches have often served, not the kingdom of God, but the kingdoms of this world's power systems, by seeking merely to keep order and decency within those systems rather than challenging their basic beliefs and abuses. If Moses had adopted this policy, he would never have led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt; he would merely have implored them to be good, well-mannered, morally decent slaves. The power systems that run human societies almost always welcome such domesticated religion because, rather than challenging their authority and wealth, it only helps them keep order in the realm.

The effect of emphasizing *turning away from* sins rather than *turning toward* God has been legalism. We have made repentance sound as though it means cleaning up our own lives and becoming virtuous, religious, and charitable so we will win God's approval and deserve God's favor. Jesus has no such message. He proclaims grace, not legalism. Turn to God and receive the kingdom. You don't have to deserve it; indeed, you can't. Just want it and turn to receive it. He compares the kingdom of God to a pearl of such great value that the pearl merchant who discovers it gladly sells everything he owns so he can buy it. For Jesus, leaving behind what does not belong to the kingdom is an act of thankfulness and liberation, not a duty to be performed in the hope of reward.

“Believe in” The New Testament is written in Greek (even though Jesus spoke Aramaic), and in Greek the phrase is actually “believe into.” It means to put yourself into, commit to, entrust your hopes and your life to God. We use “believe in” to mean nothing more than to acknowledge the existence of something. “I believe in God.” I don't do anything about it, but I believe that God exists.

We talked briefly again about my belief in the planet Pluto. I believe it's out there in space even though I can't see it. I believe it exists, but I really don't care much. If tomorrow we were to learn, beyond reasonable doubt, that scientists had proved Pluto does not really exist – is not out there in space after all – I wouldn't lose any sleep over losing Pluto. Nothing in my life would change. So, in what sense do I believe in Pluto? Is that the same sense in which I believe in God? The New Testament's Letter of James says the demons believe in God (in God's existence and oneness) and even tremble at the thought, but they do not believe in God in the way Jesus calls us to believe in God.

“Believe in the good news.” is, literally, to believe in the “announcement” Jesus is making, which is an announcement of good news (gospel). God's coming is good news to people who receive it as good news. Others will hear it as bad news, but who are they? Jesus' teaching and his experience both tell us they are they people who remain thoroughly invested in this world as it is – in the present orders of life without God's love and mercy. Such people may be, and often are, highly religious, but they hate the very idea of grace, and Jesus' good news turned out to be grace for lost, sinful, and shameful people. Those with too much personal stake in the old order do not welcome the new. So, Jesus says (in Luke 6), “Woe to you who are rich,” not because God hates

rich people or wants to punish them for having wealth, but because they tend not to welcome the kingdom; they love things just the way they are.

Who is Jesus?

We began by thinking in terms of “more than.” Jesus is a human being, but more than a human being. He is a teacher but more than a teacher, a healer but more than a healer, a prophet but more than a prophet. He is even more than just the Messiah – certainly more than the people’s various conceptions of what the Messiah should be, many of which were projections of their own religious ambitions and nationalistic aspirations.

We talked about the four “Servant Songs” in the second part of Isaiah (chapters 40-55) which comes out of the years of Babylonian exile. There we see the Servant who will not break the bruised reed or snuff the dimly burning wick, who does not assert himself or attempt to dominate anyone, and who finally suffers and dies innocently for the sake of many sinful people. Much more than he ever tried to take the royal or virtuous forms of the Messiah, Jesus took the form of the Servant of Yahweh (see Philippians 2). He does not force himself or his will upon people but gives himself to suffering, shame, and death in order to redeem us for God.

We (the church) say Jesus is “fully human and fully divine.” John introduces him as the Word of God become flesh to live among us. We call his birth his “incarnation” – his entering into our flesh and blood. We name him Son of God and even God the Son. From him, we both receive and learn life.

We focused on the idea that to know Jesus the human being is to know God and God’s will. “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” but also, “the Father is greater than I.” (Both quotes come from the Gospel of John.) Paul, probably using a current hymn or poem about Jesus, says, “he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant.” Jesus objects to being called “Good Master,” and declares, “No one is good but God alone.” Yet, we insist that to know him is to know God as God truly is.

In Jesus, we see the way God is. Jesus did not go around Galilee making people sick, killing them, taking revenge upon his enemies and critics, or excluding people from the kingdom because they did not measure up to his standards of morality and religion. So, what is God really like? And what is God’s will? Is it really God’s will to damn the majority of the world’s people? Is it a will for sickness, suffering, and oppression? Is it a desire for cowering human beings to submit to divine authority? Jesus’ life and teaching say, “No,” to such misunderstandings of God’s will. In him, we see a different will of God at work – a will to liberate, forgive, restore, heal, and love.

Disciples

The confirmation course is meant to be discipleship training. At confirmation, the students are commissioned as disciples of Jesus Christ. In fact, disciple means student – a student of life,

learning it from a master or teacher. Jesus calls disciples to teach and train, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the world. After his resurrection, they become apostles (people sent). He calls and teaches a few people for the sake of many. So, he tells his first disciples who were fishermen, that he will now teach them to fish for people.

John 15 takes discipleship a big step further. “I no longer call you servants,” Jesus tells them, because a servant does not know (understand and share) the master’s mind and purpose. “I call you friends.” “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” At the end of one of his books, a famous cosmologist declares that if we can learn the (scientific) secrets of the universe we will know the mind of God. He’s wrong. If we can know and share the way of Jesus and his cross, then we will know the mind of God. We do not need to uncover the mysteries of the universe to know God, nor can we find God that way, however much we may learn of our own world in its largest and smallest dimensions. To know God, we need to find the truth of love that is willing to suffer and give itself for those it loves, whether they deserve it or not. The mind of God is not revealed in the cosmos or the atom but on the cross.

For next time, we will read Luke, chapter 15.