

January 8, 2017
Sermon Manuscript

Matthew 4:12-22

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And 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, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Clarifying the Sermon on the Mount:
The Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 4:12-22)

Well, we are now in the season of Epiphany. And a dominant theme of this season is the need we *all* have for God to reveal himself and his truth to us. In other words, you could say that all of us *need* epiphanies. For example, any of us can open our Bible and read, but apart from God *illuminating* it for us and giving us understanding of what it means by His Holy Spirit the words would be of little value. And it is with this theme of Epiphany in mind that we begin a series today for the whole season of epiphany... on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5-7, is easily the most important sermon – the *greatest* sermon – ever preached. And yet, if any passage of scripture ever begged for the need for divine illumination, the Sermon on the Mount is it! Portions of it are among some of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible, and often times to great harm.

Well, a year or two ago the Vestry and I began to read Dallas Willard's book called “The Divine Conspiracy”, and if you've been around here long enough you've probably heard me reference it many times. But the primary focus of this book is to **clarify** the meaning of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. And it has done that

for me in so many ways. I can't tell you how many times while reading Willard's book I've felt as if scales were falling off of my eyes. I honestly used to find the Sermon on the Mount to be quite bewildering, but with Willard's help it has become a passage that breathes great life into my soul. So beginning today and during this season of Epiphany, I will be drawing heavily on Willard as we walk together – many of us in our Life Groups – seeking to understand all that Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount. #

Now, this morning our gospel passage is actually *not* from the Sermon on the Mount itself. I've taken it from the preceding chapter, because before we get to Jesus' sermon, we need to establish some foundations to make sure we all encounter the sermon on equal footing. And the foundation I want us to establish today is a correct understanding of the "Kingdom of Heaven". #

Today I want to focus on a particular verse from our passage: verse 17, that says Jesus came preaching, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" This phrase is probably the most basic statement of Jesus' good news for the world, and yet over the years this phrase has become widely misunderstood by Christians. So, my goal this morning is to help us recover a biblical understanding of what Jesus meant when he said "the kingdom of heaven is at hand", one that is consistent with how Jesus' disciples (like Simon, Andrew, James and John) would eventually come to understand it. And to do that, I'll need to begin by debunking some common misunderstandings. #

There are two ways Jesus' gospel message here is most often misinterpreted or misunderstood. And not surprisingly, one is found on the right – in conservative Christianity – and the other is found on the left – in liberal Christianity.

On the right, Jesus' gospel is often thought to be concerned primarily with how to deal with sin and its effects. Folks from this camp read Jesus' words "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*" and assume he is talking about the afterlife. Perhaps it's the use of the word heaven (which we'll get to later), but here Jesus is thought by many to be saying to his disciples "I have come to get you into heaven!"

Now, certainly it is true that those who follow Jesus can expect to live eternally with God after they die. But the problem is that the afterlife is not specifically what Jesus is talking about here, and frankly it is only a part of what His gospel is all about.

But, you see, in much of conservative Christianity, this has become almost all that the gospel is about: the forgiveness of sins is often all that seems to really matter. Any notion of a different way of living or God transforming believers' character to become more like Christ seems eclipsed by the priority and importance of obtaining a sort of fire insurance for the final judgment. And there is a Christian bumper sticker that exemplifies this perfectly... it says "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." Now

Christians certainly are far from perfect, but what this bumper sticker unfortunately implies is that “we can have a faith in Christ that brings forgiveness, while in-every-other-respect our life is no different from those who don’t believe in Christ at all.

Willard calls this distorted version of the faith Barcode Christianity, because it reminds him of the barcode stickers on the items you buy at the grocery store. Insofar as the scanner computer is concerned, it makes no difference what item the sticker is on, the scanner reads the code and totally disregards everything else. So if the ice cream sticker is on the dog food, then by-golly it’s dog food (so far as the scanner knows or cares)! Well, barcode Christianity says that this is the way faith works, that if I believe a few certain events occurred in history or pray some specific words or associate with a certain church then *by that action* an appropriate amount or righteousness is shifted from Christ’s account to my account and I am “saved”. Well, okay... but is that really all it’s about? Did God really create all of this life and all of us to ultimately boil it down to a game of Bar Code Christianity? Well, this limited gospel message is often what is preached in churches across the country. ##

But there is also a common misinterpretation on the left. Many in liberal Christianity read Jesus preaching “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” and hear a battle cry of liberation. For them the gospel has become entirely social and the life of a Christian is about activism: from civil rights and protesting the war in the 60s, followed by gender equality and political correctness in the 70s, 80s and 90s, and now (apparently) equality for people of all sexual preferences. They see God as standing behind any efforts for liberation, equality, and community; and that not only is this what Jesus died to promote but, wherever humans make efforts in these directions: that is where his spirit lives on. If this movement had a bumper sticker, it might say “Christians aren’t perfect, just committed to liberation.”

So total inclusivism of all beliefs and practices (except oppressive ones) is its cardinal virtue, meaning that Jesus’ claim to be the way, the truth, has to go as well. Furthermore, there is no concept that God and Jesus are persons, presently alive and accessibly to us. James Pike, the Episcopal Bishop over in San Francisco in the 1960s and a heretic, expressed this view when he famously said, “I don’t believe in a God that tinkers.” So prayer is reduced to a mere ritual and everything becomes about “love”, the only problem being that – disconnected from Jesus – “‘love’ becomes only what the current ideology says it is”. ##

Now, on the surface these two misinterpretations of Jesus’ gospel I have described really couldn’t be more different right? One is conservative, one is liberal. In fact, if you threw folks from these two camps in the same room, they might try and kill one another. But as different as these approaches to the Christian faith are, they surprisingly have much in common:

First of all, both of them are about managing sin. On the right side the primary concern is dealing with the personal guilt of sin and on the left side the primary concern is dealing with evils in society. And, I should say there is truth in both of them... 1) the fact that we are guilty of sin before God is certainly an important issue Christ came to deal with and 2) Christ also taught us to care for the oppressed and to choose the path of love over hate (his definition of “love”, not the culture’s). So both of these approaches to the Christian faith manage to capture some of the gospel – we might even say they capture, say, a third of the gospel (though *different* thirds, mind you).

But they miss out on the most important third, which pertains to *how we live*. You see, when you really get down to it, in both of these gospel messages I’ve presented this life – our personal daily existence – is essentially irrelevant, or is only marginally important. With both approaches, the notion that the gospel has any bearing on how I go about my job or spend my time or engage in personal relationships is largely absent. Any drive for God to change my character or transform me to become more like Christ is largely superfluous. With Barcode Christianity, “What’s it matter how I live? I’ve got my barcode of forgiveness, my get-out-of-jail-free-card!” And on the left, the evils of this world are all seen to be external to me: “the problem is this oppressive law or this ridiculous war or this *president-elect*.” #

And both of these approaches marginalize Jesus. Now the Barcode Christians would argue this, but they basically reduce Jesus to an eternal life concierge or travel agent who simply takes care of all the arrangements and can be otherwise ignored. And on the left: “one can’t expect us to take actually Jesus’ moral teachings seriously, can they?” #

If you wonder how we live in a country where 94 percent of people claim to believe in God, and 74 percent claim to have made a commitment to Jesus Christ and yet our rates of crime, family failures, addictions, and financial misconduct are off the charts... we need look no further than these very popular distortions of the gospel. #

Okay, so if these are ways Jesus’ gospel message is often misunderstood, what does “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” mean? What is Jesus saying?

Well, let’s first talk about what is meant by the word “kingdom”. [And some of you have heard me talk about this before, but it bears repeating...] Willard explains that God created all of us humans to rule. In fact, Willard contends that every single one of us has a kingdom. Our ‘kingdom’ is whatever we have dominion over where we determine what happens. So what would that include? Well, all of us have say over what we do with our time, we have say over any property we own, we have say over our money, and we of course have say over our abilities and our attitudes, which determine what we do and how we treat people, places, and things. So, you see, all

that we have dominion over constitutes *our* little kingdom, where whatever we choose is what happens, our will reigns.

However, Willard explains that God has given us these realms of responsibility and choice with the intention that we would exercise our rule in union with Him and in accordance with His will. God's intention is to be our constant companion and coworker in all that we do. And *when* we do that, *wherever* we do that, God's kingdom is present, because God's kingdom is present *anywhere* that what God wants done is done

The problem, of course, is that none of us do this naturally. Our sinfulness inclines us to reign or rule over our little kingdoms – our realms of authority – without God, and relying on our own understanding. And, when we live *this* way, we make a mess of all sorts of things and in many ways we flounder. Sure, some of us may be considered successful in some ways in the eyes of the world, but what we are able to do with our time and resources and abilities is *extremely* limited and *hindered* by our character flaws, compared to what we could accomplish by working in partnership with God.

However, when we go through life in union with God, when we surrender to His will and exercise our dominion in his wisdom and power, He enables us to use our time and resources and abilities more effectively and more efficiently, He begins to mold our character to desire what the good, and he uses us in ways that make an eternal impact: glorifying him. That is what the kingdom of God looks in our lives! #

But what about this word 'heaven', 'kingdom of heaven'? What's that all about? Well it's interesting that the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' only occurs in Matthew; in all of the other gospels Jesus only says "Kingdom of God". Remember: Matthew wrote his gospel to Jews. Now, in some sense the Kingdom of Heaven is the same thing as the Kingdom of God, which we've just been describing. But Matthew emphasizes the word 'heaven' because for his Jewish audience this emphasize God's nearness.

Now this may seem strange to us: whenever we think of heaven, we think of some place far away, some different plane of reality. But this notion of distance, of heaven being far away, was not how the word "heaven" was understood by the Jews. You see littered throughout the Old Testament the we have instances of God speaking "from heaven": when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, we're told God an angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven and said "don't touch the boy" (Gen 22:11,15); when God gave Moses the 10 Commandments he spoke to him from heaven (Exodus 20), we have God thundering from heaven upon the enemies of Israel during battle (1 Sam 7:10). So, the word "heaven" reminds them of experiences, not when God was far away, but when he was near. When God interacted with his people from 'heaven',

it meant God is here, accessible! So when Jesus says that in him “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” he is saying that *in him* God has finally become consistently near and accessible to humans.

Really much of the cause for confusion over this has come from the fact that in the original Greek of the New Testament, there is one word – tou ouranou – that can be translated as least 3 different ways: it can be translated as ‘heaven’, as ‘sky’, or as ‘air’ or ‘atmosphere’.

So the problem is that when we hear the word heaven, we either think far away or afterlife. Just like when we pray the Lord’s Prayer: when we say “our father, who art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9) I bet we all think “our father who is way up there,” when just the opposite is what is intended. In Matthew, Jesus is trying to communicate that God is now here and immediately accessible – the real meaning of the prayer is “our father who is here, in the atmosphere.”

So, when Jesus says “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” – he’s not talking about future afterlife, he’s saying the kingdom is here now. God’s rule and righteousness are now freely available to any of us willing to live in reliance upon Jesus. The one who is pure power and pure love is “at hand”, he is waiting to walk with us and help us through each and every day life. The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Heaven: available to us now.

But we still have to repent to receive it. Now, you may say “well I’ve repented of my sins!” But I’m not talking about sinful actions like lying or stealing or lusting or cursing. I’m talking about the sin of ruling our kingdom in our own strength and our own way. Have we repented of this? Because this is the core of sin: all other sins we may commit are really just symptoms of ruling our kingdom *our* way, apart from God.

To repent literally means ‘to turn’. And God is waiting for each us to turn toward him and choose to do life in union with him - each day; and sometimes we need to do this *multiple* times a day. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, but we still have to open ourselves to it, we have to seek out this partnership with Jesus. #

I love the way Willard illustrates this. He says when he was growing up in southern Missouri he lived in an area that was so rural that there was no electricity available – this was back in the 1940s. So there was no electricity available *until* he was a senior in high school (in the early 1950s) when the power lines were finally extended to his part of the county. And he says, “When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life—daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it—could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements, understand them, and take the practical

steps involved in relying on it.” And that is precisely what is required of us with Christ.
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Willard says that when those power lines were put up, the strange thing is that there were some who refused to accept it. So here was this power that could make their lives far better and if they would only make some simple arrangements, they could utilize it. But there were some who did not “enter the kingdom of electricity,” as he calls it ☺. *Some* decided they couldn’t afford it, that it wasn’t worth the price. *Others* just didn’t want to change.

Friends, how have we responded to Jesus’ invitation to the kingdom? Are we seeking to go about life in union with Him, to exercise whatever dominion we have in him? Or have we decided it’s not worth the cost of giving up control or that we’d rather not *have* to change.

Do we understand that Jesus – the Lord of the universe, the smartest man who ever lived, the one who always knows the best way to do anything, who demonstrated in his earthly life a mastery over the physical, moral, and spiritual realms – *he* is inviting us participate in relationship with him each day? Just imagine what a difference he could make in our lives, *should* make in our lives. And then invite him in! Ask him to show you the kingdom he’s given you dominion over and ask him for the wisdom and power to rule that kingdom for HIS glory. Get in the habit of submitting yourself to Him wherever you find yourself, and let God work through you to make an eternal impact! #

God has built the power lines. Surely we’re not going to opt for remaining in the dark!?!

Amen.

Sources used:

The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard.

The Divine Conspiracy Participant’s Guide by Dallas Willard with Kevin and Sherry Harney.