

The Best News 12-7-03

Matthew 4:23-25

Matthew 4:23-25 (NIV) 23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. 24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. 25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

"*Jesus went throughout Galilee...*" In this paragraph we have an overview of the first year of Jesus' ministry. We'll see some of the details in the following chapters. He spent this year traveling through Galilee, fulfilling the words of Isaiah, being a great light to a land that was in darkness and the shadow of death. This first year would be one of teaching and healing the masses. Galilee was a land area of about 40 by 70 miles, but if Josephus was correct, it contained around 3 million people. Word spread like a prairie fire, and Jews and even Gentiles from surrounding regions gathered around Jesus, marveling at the miraculous wonders and teachings. This would become known as the popular year of Jesus' ministry.

"*...teaching in their synagogues...*" Synagogues were not a part of ancient Jewish tradition. They sprang up near the end of the captivity. Since the Temple was in disrepair and inaccessible to most in those days, places to gather the community for instruction and the reading of the Torah were created. They originally served as a type of town hall. The Jews realized their exile was because of their rejection of God's word, and they wanted weekly instruction in the meeting place to be sure to conform to the Word of God. The synagogue took on more and more of a religious role. After the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the synagogue took the place of the Temple as the religious center of Jewish life.

Archeologists have uncovered a few first century synagogues, some of the oldest to be discovered. One is in Gamla, the city we talked about last week as being the birthplace of the zealot movement. Another is in Masada, used by the holdouts against Rome. In the one in Gamla, there is a corner closet for the scrolls, and a seat upon which to sit while reading the scroll. This special stone chair was called Moses' seat, since it was there that you sat to read the writings of Moses. A continuous bench runs along each side of the building. The men sat on one side and the women on the other. The men took turns each week reading the scrolls. Different areas had different customs but generally a portion of the Torah, a portion of the prophets, and some of the psalms were read or sung. After the reading, one of the elders who sat in front would comment on the passage, or in some cases translate it into the language of the people.

In Jesus' day, many synagogues had a Greek version to read from. We call it the Septuagint. Jesus was recognized as a great teacher, a rabbi. When He visited a synagogue, He was invited to teach on the word that was read.

It is interesting that Jesus used the customs of His day. He didn't throw everything out because it wasn't perfect, but used it as opportunities to reach out to people. The Holy Spirit guided Jesus to use the religious system in spite of its imperfections. They were doing some things right. They were gathering to hear the word. They did want it to apply to their daily lives. Is it any different today? We have a greater revelation and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but we still work with imperfect organizations. Jesus related to the religious establishment of His day and worked in it. He sometimes voiced His opposition to the traditions of men, and the ways in which they had erred from the truth, but He preached in man's synagogues.

"...preaching the good news of the kingdom..." Teaching and preaching was Jesus' way of communicating the good news of the kingdom. To teach is to give instruction. To preach is to proclaim as a herald. The Bible studies we have are more along the lines of teaching. I hope you are involved in one. In the new year we will be starting them up again. Everyone should try to attend at least one. In a teaching setting we get to know one another more intimately and have more sharing of lessons learned and experiences. I can't emphasize enough how important attending a Bible study is for your spiritual growth. We are considering studying Purpose Driven Life as a church in separate Bible study groups. I hope every one of you will make an effort to be a part of that. If you are not a part of one of the small groups this Fall and would like to be a part of this six week study, please let me know after church so I will know how many books to order.

The Gospels relay a number of times in which Jesus taught small groups. There was the interchange of questions and responses and application to real life. That is still the basics of teaching Biblical truths today. If the disciples needed that, we certainly do too. I believe more spiritual growth takes place in the small group setting than in the worship service on Sundays.

Preaching is what I am doing right now. I stand here to declare to you the Word of God, hopefully not my own words or opinions. Jesus was heralding the kingdom of heaven. He came from heaven to declare heaven's perspective. Heaven was thunderously excited about this beginning of Jesus' ministry, the establishing of the Kingdom. The King was declaring what submission to Him was like. He is about to declare, in the following chapters, what living in the kingdom of heaven looks like. The kingdom comes in the heart of men and transforms their lives from the inside out. His life was going to make this transformation possible.

Man had been living under the kingdoms of man. At best, they had been the nation of Israel under a godly leader and God's laws. At worst they have been living under Satan's world system. During the temptation, Satan declared that he had authority over the world's kingdoms. But the kingdom of heaven is infinitely better than any of these. It means having the King to come and live in you and work with you for your good. To yield to the King is to find all the fruits of the Spirit in whatever comes into your life. To live as subjects of the kingdom of heaven, means being free from the bondage of sin and its tyranny over our lives. It is seeing things as they are and not as the Deceiver presents them. All of Jesus' preaching could be

called preaching about the kingdom of heaven, for it all brings light into a dark world. It all teaches the perspective of heaven, which is truth.

That is called "good news". I think it's the best news that man has ever heard. We have had the wonderful news of the end of wars, of the discovery of vaccinations that keep us from disease, and more personally, that someone we love was going to live and not die. But the greatest news, the best news to ever be heralded, was that of the kingdom. It tells us that we can live in victory over sin and its destructiveness. It tells us that every tear will be wiped away forever. It tells us that the King will reign in righteousness. There will be an end of all injustice. But best of all, it tells us that we are made right with God, and not only right, but completely righteous in His sight. We have the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus! (1Corinthians 5:21) That is the best news you could ever hope to hear.

What joy there is in hearing Jesus as He sheds light into the darkness, as He gives hope to the hopeless! As He declares the best news that man will ever hear, oppression turns to freedom, and condemnation to celebration. God reveals His heart for the world in the words and life of Jesus. That's the best news!

Commented [notes1]: 21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.
2 Cor 5:21 (KJV)

"...and healing every disease and sickness among the people." As Jesus went about telling the people about the kingdom, and He backed it up by healing every sickness and disease. Now, I've heard of writings that told of others who could heal during that time. I would put them in one of two categories, shysters or psychological healing. We have both in the world today. There are unscrupulous people who play on people's emotions, plant a few pretend cripples in the audience, get the crowd in a frenzy, and take an offering. Glory to God? I don't think so!

There are others who cause people to face the emotional or psychological root of their problem. The body is an amazing thing. The mind can make us have symptoms of illness. When the source of the illness is gone, the unforgiveness or bitterness is released, so is its manifestation in our body.

Then there is the genuine article. It happens today. Not as often as people would like to think, and not every time we ask for it. In Jesus' case, every disease and illness was healed. Why? He is Lord! He is over all creation. He speaks and it is so. He said, "*If I had not done among them the works which no one else had done, they would not be guilty of sin,*" (John 15:24). There was no one, then or now, that can hold a candle to that. He was walking in fulfillment of Isaiah 35:5-6. *5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.* (NIV) He was the living water for the souls of thirsty mankind.

Commented [notes2]: 24 If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father.
John 15:24 (NIV)

"...people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them." It didn't matter what the affliction was, Jesus was the answer. It doesn't matter today what your trouble is, Jesus is the answer. He may choose to heal you, or He may give you grace to endure. Some teach that every disease

should be healed today. I know too many godly people that suffer with some kind of affliction to believe that there is something wrong with their faith. If that is the case, there was something wrong with the Apostle Paul's faith. He said he prayed three times to be healed, but God said it was good for him to be afflicted to keep him humbly reliant on God's power. (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

In Jesus' case, God was using the universal healing of all who came to Him to show that He was Lord over all. No sickness is greater, no affliction is stronger, nothing that happens is out of the reach of His power. There was no one like this in the Old Testament. There was never anyone like this in the history of mankind. When Matthew wrote this there were thousands of people who could say, "Yes, I brought my child, or wife, or friend to Jesus and they were healed." No one said, "Wait a minute. I went to Him and he couldn't heal my headache!" If you had someone like that running around, this new group would not have taken off like it did. It exploded because the eyewitnesses confirmed it was true.

Imagine if today, someone had power like this. There would be a line from now until the day that man died. People have claimed to have power like this. In one sense we do because He works through us. The difference is that Jesus was displaying the proof that He was the Creator (John 15:24). If people are in need of evidence, Jesus still performs healing through us today (Mark 16:17-18). If the affliction is to teach us to go to Him for all things, or to convince the lost of Jesus' authority, there is healing today. James tells us to go to the elders of the church and have them pray, anointing you with oil and placing their hands on you (James 5:14-15). That is the instruction to those who are ill in the church, and yet, so few ask the elders for prayer. It doesn't tell the elders to chase you down; you need to ask. It is an expression of faith, obedience, and submission to God's word.

The Apostles had this power, to some extent, to testify to their message of the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-22). But nobody ever had the power to heal and restore like the Creator. Everyone that was brought to Him was healed. 100% success rate (Matthew 8:16)! Every once in awhile we get a guest from Japan that has read about the healing power of the red rocks, or a vortex, or some spring of water. We tell them, "If the claims were true, don't you think there would be a line as far as the eye could see to this spot?" "Oh, yeah! I guess you're right," they say. People want to believe the strangest things but balk at believing the one real thing, Jesus! That is because you don't have to submit to a red rock, or a vortex, or water. You just use it. Somehow we innately know that you can't use Jesus. You come and submit, or you resist, but you can't just use Him and lose Him.

Remember, Matthew is telling us that Jesus is the King. You don't stand before a king like this and just tell Him what you want while living in rebellion to everything He stands for. This is the King of the kingdom of heaven. He went about proving it with His life and teaching and preaching it with His words.

"Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." The days of popularity would end. About a third of the way into Jesus' ministry, He will have to confront them on why they are following.

Commented [notes3]: 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.
2 Cor 12:8-9 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 24 If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father.
John 15:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.
Mark 16:17-18 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.
James 5:14-15 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 21 Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."
Acts 1:21-22 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 16 When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.
Matt 8:16 (NIV)

It's interesting that in the previous passage He just told the disciples to, "Come, follow me." He didn't tell these folks the same thing, but they are following.

Last week we talked about the difference between a mere believer and a disciple. We looked at the journey from belief to discipleship. These folks were barely in the believer category if at all. They had very different motives. Some came because it was exciting. Some followed because it made them feel important. Some just wanted to have some news to share with their neighbors. Wouldn't it be great to see a miracle first hand, like an arm restored, or a blind man given sight? What fun! Others followed to find fault. Some wanted to make Him a king who could deal with the taxman, and others just wanted to be a part of the crowd.

A disciple follows to learn about Jesus. A real disciple follows to be changed, to become more like his Master.

Why do you follow? Why are you here this morning? Is it the thing to do? Did you hear we have the kind of preaching or music you like? Is it because your friends come here? Or are you here as a disciple to learn about Jesus, and to be changed to be more like your Master?

Two kinds of followers with two different motivations were following Jesus. One kind of follower was there for some kind of personal gratification. The other kind was there to be changed, to be transformed, to get direction, and submit to the King. These two kinds of followers will end up with two very different results. One will go home dissatisfied. They might say things like, "He healed me, but my illness came back." "I liked part of what He said, but part of it was too personal." "The miracles were amazing, but the teaching was too black and white for me."

Disciples have a very different response. "I don't understand it all, but I know He has the words of life." (John 6:68) "I never saw it that way before; no one speaks like He does." (John 7:46) And the response I like best of all came from a disciple named Mary, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38)

The difference is this, one group retained the right to do what they willed, the other group gave up their will to do what Jesus wills. Have you joined the later group? As we deal with business of the new year, will we seek God's will or our own? As we go through this Christmas Season will we be seeking God's heart or following our own? The best news is for those who seek His will. He invites them into His kingdom, to come under His good guidance, to share in His heart, and find real purpose and meaning in life. Have you received the best news a person could ever hear? Jesus has come to be your King. Enter into His kingdom, and begin living a life of service to the King of kings.

Commented [notes9]: 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.
John 6:68 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 46 The officers answered, Never man spake like this man.
John 7:46 (KJV)

Commented [notes11]: 38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.
Luke 1:38 (NIV)