

Ministry of the Word

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 27, 2018.

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—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.” From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan (Matt. 4:12–25).

Jesus’ earthly ministry commenced at his baptism by John the Baptist. Anointed by the Holy Spirit for ministry, He was led into the wilderness. Having fasted forty days and nights, He was tempted and tried by the fallen angel Lucifer. The summary of His temptations may be classified as the temptations of humanity: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

As Israel had been tempted and tried in the wilderness for forty years, so Jesus was tempted, yet without sin. As the true and faithful Son of Israel, the living Word of God had countered temptation with the written Word of God. Therefore, because “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1), and because “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a), we see Jesus’ earthly ministry commence as a ministry of the Word. How would the living Word minister to His people? Through a ministry of preaching, a ministry of teaching, and a ministry of healing.

The Ministry of Preaching

The path of Jesus’ ministry had been led by the prophet John the Baptist, whose ministry was recognized by the repentance and baptism of many. The public response, however, was not because their ears were tickled. John’s words were bold and sometimes harsh, and he reserved his harshest words for the conservative and liberal elite of his culture.

Nor was the king safe from John's righteous criticism. Publically denouncing the king's adultery and marriage to his brother's wife, John's preaching was rewarded by arrest and imprisonment. Hearing of John's arrest, Jesus left Nazareth and moved to the region of Galilee to the village of Capernaum by the sea.

John had preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and the kingdom had come in its King, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. The wisemen had worshiped Him as a child, as King of the Jews. Where does the King of the Jews belong? Every Jew would answer: Jerusalem. No one would say Capernaum. Yet, the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—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."

As prophesied, so was it fulfilled in Jesus' ministry. The ancient boundaries of the children of Zebulun and Naphtali also were a trade route for other tribes, languages, and nations. In fact, in first century Galilee, historians estimate that more than half the population was Gentile. But, Capernaum was not considered the home of a king, unless the King had come first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. Just as a kingdom is recognized in its king, so light shines brightest in darkness. And where Jesus is, people living in darkness see the light. He is the "light of the world" (John 8:12).

Having established Himself not in royal Jerusalem but in the darkness of Capernaum, Jesus began to preach a sermon identical to John's: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The preaching ministry of Jesus, which will be revealed in greater depth through the Gospel of Matthew, begins where John left off: a call to God's covenant people to repent.

As the word "repent" is used in Scripture, it can be understood in two ways. First, there is a repentance of attrition, meaning essentially remorse for doing wrong (or getting caught). When I am asked by parents about how to tell when a child has made a credible profession of faith, I start here. Has the child exemplified conviction of sin or simply expressed remorse for doing wrong? Similarly, many an evangelical aisle has been filled by children and adults alike seeking to avoid the horrific conditions of hell but not heart-felt conviction of sin.

The second kind of repentance witnessed in Scripture is a repentance of contrition, meaning a genuine and deep remorse for offending God. King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband. Convicted of his sin by the ministry of the Word, how did David respond? David confessed, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:3-4a). The world struggles with understanding repentance of contrition. It would have us believe our greatest offenses are to one another. Is not disrespect to authority, murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting sins against my neighbor? Indeed, but they are first and foremost sins against God. Your sin and my sin are primarily an offense to holy God, and secondarily an offense to our neighbor.

Jesus' sermon is a call to God's people to repent, to turn from their sin to God, to confess their sin, for God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). So it is for God's covenant people today. When was the last time you confessed and repented of your sin to God? When was the last time you confessed to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight"? When was the last time you prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:10, 17). Repent.

But, the second half of Jesus' sermon is connected to the first: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The kingdom of heaven had come, at hand stood the King. The two points of Jesus' sermon are connected because it is the Spirit of Christ who brings us to repentance, regenerates our hearts, and brings us to Christ our King. So, Jesus came with a ministry of preaching, but also a ministry of teaching.

Ministry of Teaching

While walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sought two fishermen, brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew. His call to them was simple: In the earthly kingdom there are fish to be caught, but in the heavenly kingdom there are men to be caught and taught. Similarly, Jesus calls two other fishermen, brothers, the sons of Zebedee, James and John. These men would help form a closed group of twelve, the disciples of Christ. And, these men would be taught by the living Word.

Jesus' ministry of teaching is witnessed in two ways: small group discipleship and large group lecturing. Jesus called His disciples individually and poured into them. He taught them to distinguish between the temporal and the eternal, between catching a fish for food and feeding a soul for life. He taught them not only how to listen to a parable but also how to understand it. He endured their shortcomings and confronted their sins. But, most importantly He revealed Himself to them. As the Apostle John testified, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:1–4).

The second way that Jesus taught was in a large group. Jesus taught in the synagogues, the church buildings of his culture, he taught in the open air, on mountains and in fields. Jesus' teaching style involved story, syllogism, and hyperbole. For modern ears used to precision, Jesus' teaching is refreshingly nuanced. His stories capture our imaginations but also can leave us wondering. But, most importantly He revealed Himself. Teaching in his hometown synagogue, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty

those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). He then said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus' teaching had purpose: the revelation of Himself, the Word of God.

This too is a helpful reminder to us in our teaching and learning, whether in a small group setting or large. We are not merely gatherers and conveyers of factual data. Teaching in Christ's Church always has purpose, namely the exaltation of Christ to the glory of God. As Paul boldly confessed, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In a world full of distractions, the gospel is refreshingly simple. There is, however, a third element of complement to Jesus' preaching and teaching, an often misunderstood element, a ministry of healing.

Ministry of Healing

As Jesus went throughout Galilee, he taught, preached, and healed. Specifically, Matthew reveals that Jesus preached "the gospel of the kingdom," the good news that the kingdom of heaven had come as prophetically promised. Accompanying this gospel preaching was healing of "every disease and every affliction," including "various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics."

If Jesus came preaching the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, why did he heal earthly diseases and afflictions and cast out demons? In His teaching, Jesus cautioned, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Why then did He heal temporal bodies while preaching to the eternal soul? Jesus worked physical, emotional, and spiritual healing as confirmation of His ministry of the Word.

Just as the Word of God was confirmed through the miraculous works of the Old Testament prophets, so the living Word of God had come confirming His Word in authority and power. In every miracle that Jesus worked His divine nature was revealed and His Word confirmed. As Jesus told the Pharisees, "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:37-38). For this reason we should pay close attention to the miraculous works of Jesus and seek to understand the message conveyed, not to emulate them but to see Jesus.

As you would imagine, Jesus' miraculous works attracted "great crowds" from around the region, crowds that would grow in enthusiastic support and eventually abandonment. Here too is a caution for us as well. Do we follow Jesus for what He can do for us temporally? Do we consider Christianity to be a step toward attaining our selfish desires? Jesus' call is a call to follow Him, like Andrew, Peter, James, and John. To His fickle followers Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). And, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).

Ministry of the Word

Jesus' miraculous works point us to something far more important than physical healing or exorcism, namely Himself, the Word of God.

It is through the ministry of the Word that we see our sin, repent, and believe by God's grace. It is through the ministry of the Word that we are called to walk in "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4), as "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17). It is through the ministry of the Word that we can confess, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

So we may sing:

All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my being's ransomed power;
All my thoughts and words and doings;
All my days and all my hours.
Let my hands perform His bidding;
Let my feet run in His ways;
Let mine eyes see Jesus only;
Let my lips speak forth His praise.
Worldlings prize their gems of beauty,
Cling to gilded toys of dust;
Boast of wealth and fame and pleasure -
Only Jesus will I trust.
Since mine eyes were fixed on Jesus,
I've lost sight of all beside,
So enchained my spirit's vision,
Looking at the crucified.
Oh what wonder! How amazing!
Jesus, glorious King of kings,
Deigns to call me His beloved,
Lets me rest beneath His wings.
Amen