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Follow Me

"From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew 4:17

Key verses: Matthew 4:12-22; Luke 4-6; John 2-4

Key personalities: Jesus, and the first Disciples

Timeline: The God of Eternity becomes a Man, being fully God and fully Man, and walks the earth, about 26-28 A.D. During this time, Pontius Pilate becomes Roman governor of Judea.

Jesus' ministry began as an extraordinary itinerant preaching rabbi on the seashores of the Sea of Galilee by Capernaum. The backdrop is the area of Nazareth, a town, for centuries, thought to be a small fishing and agricultural village. Recent archeology digs have found it actually to have been a large city 20 miles from Capernaum, also much larger than previously thought. The Herods had built a very large city hub for Rome at both places--"motel" centers for trade. It was in this area that Jesus had spent the past 30 years of His earthly life experiencing humanity, all that man is, does, goes through, and can become. Then, He embarked on His mission to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven.

Key Happenings: Jesus begins His public ministry!

"Follow me." Jesus asks us to follow Him--the call we all have and must respond to. As hard as this can be for us, please imagine Jewish culture at that time. Jesus--and His great call--was unprecedented in the Jewish culture and understanding. Normally, a student would seek out a teacher, a rabbi. A rabbi would never seek students due to pride. Jesus did not have pride and arrogance. Again, He models that we are to be seekers of disciples and not just wait for them to come to us. We are to challenge each other to leave our comfort zones and enter the realm of His worship and service.

The Baptism and temptation are turning points in the ministry of Our Lord, and He embarked into public ministry, which was foretold by the prophecy of Isaiah. He went from His preparation to proclamation (Isa. 9:1-2).

Jesus' focus was on the Jews first. This was not because they were the chosen people or were better than anyone else, but because it was their responsibility to be the Ambassadors of God to the world (Gen 12:1-3; Matt. 28:19)! The Gentiles were always in God's plan, never an afterthought!

Jesus' *preaching*, which means "to herald, or to proclaim," centered on two major themes: Repentance and the Kingdom of God. He even addressed the synagogues on the Sabbath, stating dogmatically He is the long-awaited Messiah, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 61; Luke 4:17-24).

Jesus preached the "Kingdom of Heaven," and the "Kingdom of God"; these are the same and both mean, "God's rule" and sovereignty. The Kingdom is now and is to come! They both point to the church today as well as to our eternal future. Matthew used the expression "Kingdom of Heaven," whereas the other gospels use the term "Kingdom of God." The distinction is the audience. The Jews were reluctant to say the name of God because of their high reverence to His Name. To the Gentiles and Greeks, the term needed to have 'God' in it (Matt. 3:2; 4:23; 5:3,10,19-20; 6:10; 33; 7:21; 10:7; 13:24-47).

- The Jews were expecting a literal, physical kingdom, but it is spiritual in nature and eternal in scope (John 18:36; Rom. 14:17).
- We are now in the Kingdom of Heaven (Col. 1:13; 4:11; 2 Thess. 1:5; Heb. 12:28; James 2:5; 2 Pet. 1:10-11; Rev. 1:9)!

- The Church as a whole, the Body of Christ (not the buildings!), are the citizens, whose people are the elect, saved by grace, and submissive to His Will, serves as its repetitive and physical manifestation on Earth (Matt. 7:21-23; 16:18; Col. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:12).
- The Kingdom of Heaven will culminate with our Lord's second coming and a new heaven and earth (2 Pet. 3:13-14; Rev. 21-22).
- We have a responsibility to live our lives as His ambassadors of truth with the great commandment (Mark 12:28-31) and see the hope we have to come!

Repentance is the central pronouncement of Jesus' earthly ministry! The "complete change," of all we are, our goals, aspirations, values, and behaviors, so that we turn a complete 180 degrees from the way we were (2 Cor. 7:9-10). Real repentance is a life that has been changed, that transforms our heart and mind, such as turning from sin to Christ (Psalm 51; Jer. 23:22; 25:4-5; Zech. 1:3-6; Mark 6:12; Matt. 4:17; Luke 13:1-8; 3:8; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 17:30; 26:20; Rom. 12:1-2; Rev. 2: 5-22).

- Repentance is a life that has been changed! Grace is the gift He gives by His choosing (Election), because God is pure and His decisions are just, and way beyond our understanding.
- Repentance and conversion are two different things. Repentance is our response to who and what Christ did on the cross. Conversion is our salvation given to us through grace (Eph. 2:8-9). It is not by our efforts, but given by the power of the Holy Spirit. They go together as the Spirit gives us our salvation and we respond to it by turning from sin and turning to God. This is followed by a changed life (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 20:21)!
- We all need to repent. There are no people outside and above this need!

Jesus called His first disciples. Jesus' main goal for His interrelations with humanity was "discipling" above any other activity! Because of His primary goal of molding disciples, Jesus went directly and personally called those with whom He wanted to work. He took them from the normal ways of life. He did not go to the universities or synagogues, but He literally to the "man on the street."

- He called Peter and Andrew (Matt. 4:18-20)
- He called James and John (Matt. 4:21-22)
- He called Matthew (Matt. 9:9)
- The rest are chosen (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-19)
- He then sent them out (Matt. 10:1-15)

A call was extended to them and a response was given--a call without irresistible pressure, yet with passion, conviction, clarity and in Truth. He went throughout the region and went into the synagogues proclaiming that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. However, public preaching was not His main goal or reason for doing so. Why He called His disciples and us today. Jesus taught the need for repentance publicly. He further taught and challenged His disciples, both personally and systematically, that Christianity does not end at repentance and conversion; rather, it begins there (Matt. 4:17; 4:23; 9:9)!

- John the Baptist did the same with his disciples (Matt. 9:14).
- Jesus said, *Follow Me* (Matt. 4:19; 9:9). Jesus did not mean that they should just physically follow Him on the road. They were set apart, challenged, and taught their call and mission. Just as they had worked at catching fish, now they would be catching men (Luke 6:39-40)!
- An *Apostle* means emissary, or sent one, as in Jesus' personally commissioned representatives of Christ, (Matt. 10:40; 15:24; Mark 6:7-13; 30; 9:37; Luke 9: 1-6). Having disciples was a normal way for rabbis to train and develop the people who would follow them in leadership. Even the Pharisees had disciples (Matt. 22:15-16)
- Jesus ended His time on earth with an imperative command for them to make more disciples (Matt. 28:19-20), which is also our call!

What is a disciple? The word "disciple" literally means "someone who pledges to be a "learner." Moreover, it is someone who follows another's teaching, and adheres to it--discipline. It is a commitment and a process. It involves commitment, and time to undertake the learning, and, as a Christian, a yearning to imitate Jesus!

Discipleship is also reciprocal. That is, when one learns, he/she makes the commitment to train someone else. That is what Jesus meant by, "*I will make you fishers of men.*" It is not just catching them and then storing them (fish were processed and sold for the betterment and use of the community); it is training, and placing, so they, too, can catch, train, and place!

Discipleship is the primary earthly goal of the Church as a whole and for the Christian as an individual. It is our duty, and the one thing Christ directly commands us to do (Matt. 28:19-20). In so doing, we will become like Him in character and share His outlook and concerns (Luke 6:39-40). We are never to make disciples in our image, like whom we are, how we think, feel, and act, but like Christ!

- We are to become His disciples!
- We are to be disciplined!
- We are to disciple others so they can disciple others.
- We have the call to fulfill the great commission by making disciples, not just converts and pew sitters (Matt. 28: 18-20)!

The 12 disciples spent three years of their lives following, learning, listening, observing, and experiencing life directly with Jesus. Then, they carried that learning and experience to the world (Matt. 10:1-15; the Book of Acts).

- It all comes down to a decision. Will we make our faith real and impacting? Will we relinquish our pride and learn and grow? Will we teach others, or will we plant our rears in the pew, so that our only impact is our butt-print in that pew?
- Let us make sure our impact comes from a life transformed and carried on to the people around us!

The world did not recognize Him/receive Him. This means the people of the earth who are opposed to God. Jesus' coming was the most incredible event of all time, yet He was not welcomed by most; He was even scoffed at, and then martyred. The religious Jews were so wrapped up in their traditions and assumptions, they did not seek the One True God or really honor Him with faith and trust. Thus, not just the Gentile world, but also the Jewish world, did not recognize God's Word, His call, His principles, or His Son (John 1:6-18; 17:5, 14-15; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Pet. 3:3).

Discipleship has a cost. Following Christ will cost us and require effort and consistency (Matt. 8:18-22; 10:38; Luke 9:57-58; 14:27).

- The original disciples left their family and good jobs (Matt. 10:37; 19:27; Luke 9:59-62; 14: 25-26; 33)!
- Jesus did not call bums with nothing better to do! Jesus expects us to know what we are getting into and embrace it with vigor and faith. Nothing can come before Him (Matt. 3:8; 6:33; Luke 14:15-24; John 8:31; 14-15)!
- We must embrace our call and responsibility to be disciplined and make disciples! If we are truly willing to learn and apply what Christ taught, we will truly be His disciples! The Church will be on fire by the Spirit and impacting the world!

Jesus ended His time on earth with an imperative command for us as individuals, and as a Church, to make more disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). Consequently, what has been your church's response to this? (Consider there is nothing we do as a church that could be more important than this! It is even more important than evangelism, which is our responsibility, but the only imperative command we are given by Christ is to do discipleship!)

Key Takeaway: Christianity does not end at repentance and conversion--it begins there! How has this been so in you? If not, what is in the way?

John the Baptist tells us that He must increase and we must decrease (John 3:29-30). If we refuse this vital call, God just may allow those hardships to come our way, breaking us down so we will yield and grow as His child. Just as a good loving parent will discipline his child, we will also receive discipline. This is not a personal attack; rather, it is a way we can grow and be better used by our Lord (1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 1:27; 1 Thess. 4:3;

5:23-24; 1 Pet. 1:5). We have to be willing to be identified with Him no matter what the cost, as the rewards will be far greater than we could ever imagine! So, are you willing to reduce yourself to the real you? The person as you are called by Jesus Christ to be? So that He is greater in character and precepts in your trust and faith, and in your obedience and application of life? Will you become less in your will, aspirations, lust, and sin? If not, what is in the way of God working in you?

The Call to the Church? We are called to disciple everyone, especially the leaders and pastors! The same message Christ gave must be our central message in the church today, not merely "feel good" messages, but targeted to those who are in sin and need a Savior (Acts. 2: 36-41; 47; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:24-26; 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph 5:5).

We, as a Church, are called to preach as Christ did on Repentance to all nations (Matt. 3:8; 28: 18-20; Luke 24:46-47; Ac 26:20; 17:30) It is as needed today, if not more so, than in Jesus' time!

Before WWII, personal mentorship was the primary way many ministers received their training in the U.S. They still went to a divinity school for formal teaching, but personal instruction from someone who was well-experienced and versed was the best way to learn and develop ministry skills, and it still is! Sadly, few will undertake this because of pride, lack of time, and/or misplaced priorities. Thus, many young pastors will make many mistakes at the expense of their congregation because there was too little supervised experience beforehand.

Have you submitted yourself to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the Good News of the Gospel proclaimed by our Lord, His disciples, and His Word?

Questions to Ponder

1. If Jesus personally visited you, what do you think He might call or ask you to do?
2. Why was Jesus rejected in His home town of Nazareth when He read Isaiah 61:1-2?
3. What is the role of repentance? Why would repentance give glory to our Lord?
4. Do you know how powerful God is? What about in your life?
5. Have you thought through the fact that Jesus, the Disciples, and Paul spent considerable time in preparation for their public ministries?
6. Does "The Kingdom of God" seem real and tangible to you now? What is in the way from your letting it be a driving force in your life?
7. How does the fact that most churches do not do discipleship affect the Kingdom of God and our call to the Great Commission?
8. Have you ever met someone who thinks they were not a part of God's plan and just an afterthought? Most Muslims in the Middle East have this philosophy, hence why they hate the Jews so much!
9. What was the message Jesus was proclaiming? Is it a message that should be proclaimed today?
10. Jesus broke the pride and arrogance to model that we are to be seekers of disciples and not just waiting for them to come to us. What is in your way from being discipled, and/or taking in someone to disciple?
11. What gets in the way of you following Jesus? What do you need to do about it?
12. Why is it that the same message Christ gave must be our central message in the church today? What happens when we do not and bow to merely "feel good" messages?