

THE BEGINNING OF OUR LORD'S MINISTRY ON EARTH

Matthew 4:12-25

Intro: It is probably true that a considerable amount of time transpired between verses 11 and 12 of this chapter – some say, as much as a year. It is impossible to say how long, or just exactly when John the Baptist had been put into prison. Mark records his imprisonment in 1:14. Luke did not refer to it until 3:20, and spoke of it as something that had already happened. The Apostle John recorded in 3:24 that “John was not yet cast into prison.” But there seems to have been a rather close connection between the beginning of the Lord’s ministry, and the end of the ministry of John. John himself said in words recorded in John 3:30, referring to the Lord, that “He must increase, but I (must) decrease.” Matthew alone tells us why John was imprisoned, and what led to his death. See Matthew 14:1-12.

John was clearly the forerunner of the Lord Jesus, the one who was to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. But when the Lord began His ministry, the ministry of John the Baptist ended. It is one of the things that we don’t understand about the ways of the Lord when we read of how John died.

It is good to consult of map of the Holy Land during the time of Christ to be able to picture more clearly where these places which are mentioned were located. The Lord had been baptized in the Jordan River. At least part of His temptation took place in Jerusalem. But he had been raised in Nazareth, and the opening verses of our text tell us that at this point the Lord moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, both cities being in Galilee. So the first point in our text has to do with

I. The Place where the Lord actually began His ministry (Matt. 4: 12-16).

It was in Capernaum. But why Capernaum? Because it was prophesied in Isaiah 9:1 and 2 that this would be the place where the people who sat in darkness would see a great light.

Capernaum was overrun with foreigners as well as being the home of many Jews. It was a very corrupt place. The spiritual darkness that was characteristic of Israel in those days seemed to be concentrated in Capernaum. That area was known as “Galilee of the Gentiles.” So instead of

beginning His ministry in Jerusalem, He began where the need seemed to be greatest. But even beyond that reason, was the greater reason that the Lord was recognizing the divine inspiration of OT prophecy, in this case, the prophecy of Isaiah.

This shows at the beginning of our Lord's ministry the high priority that He gave to the Word of God. And this is one major point that was maintained by our Lord throughout His ministry on earth. For us it is one of many lessons in the Bible that shows the authority of Scripture, and our Lord's unswerving regard for the Word. We saw this, didn't we, in the response of the Lord to each point of Satan's temptation. And it was through the ministry of the Lord that these people who were in the densest darkness, saw, not just a light, but "a great light."

But let me point out a second important factor in this passage.

II. The Method which the Lord used (Matt. 4:17a).

"From that time Jesus began to preach." Miracles came later, as we learn from verses 23 and 24, but even the precedence is given to teaching and preaching. See the first part of verse 23.

The Lord did not seek to entertain the people of Capernaum and the surrounding area. He did not argue with them to show how what He had was better than what they had. He preached. Evidently that was something that was very novel for them. But this has always been the way God has declared that His message should be spread. The prophets of the OT were preachers. We can read what they preached. The apostles of the NT were preachers. Paul's final word to Timothy was, "Preach the Word."

J. C. Ryle said this about preaching in his commentary on this passage :

It is the principal means which God has always been pleased to use for the conversion and edification of souls. The brightest days of the Church have been those days when preaching has been honored; the darkest days of the Church have been those when it has been lightly esteemed. Let us honor the sacraments and public prayers of the Church, and reverently use them; but let us beware that we do not place them above preaching (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew, p. 28).

The Lord Jesus Christ in His ministry to others was preeminently a preacher and a teacher. And His servants are to do the same.

But what did the Lord preach?

III. The Lord's Message (Matt. 4:17b).

It was twofold. His first point was "repent."

Let me quote again from J. C. Ryle. He has given us the best definition I think I have ever read on repentance. Listen to his words:

The necessity of repentance is one of the great foundation stones which lies at the very bottom of Christianity: it is a truth which needs to be pressed on all mankind without exception. High or low, rich or poor all have sinned, and are guilty before God; and all must repent and be converted, if they would be saved. – It is a truth which does not receive the attention it deserves. True repentance is no light matter: it is a thorough change of heart about sin, –in heart-felt confession of sin, –in a complete breaking off from sinful habits, and an abiding hatred of all sin. Such repentance is the inseparable companion of saving faith in Christ. –Let us prize the doctrine highly. No Christian teaching can be called sound, which does not constantly bring forward "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

The word "repent" which the Lord used is stated in the Greek as a plural, meaning that this applies to everyone. It is the in the present tense which means that we repent to begin our life with the Lord, but we keep repenting whenever we sin as Christians. And it is an imperative meaning that there is no other way to be saved. And so the Apostle Paul preaching in Athens on Mars' Hill, said that God

30 . . . now commandeth all men everywhere to repent:

31 Because He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that Man Whom He hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead (Acts 17:30b-31).

But let me add one other important word about repentance. God is the One who moves on our hearts to make us repentant for our sins. Paul told Timothy this as he instructed his young fellowservant of the Lord in 2 Timothy 2 as to how people become repentant toward God. Listen to these words found in 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,

25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God

peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

We are to preach the Gospel to people. We tell them that they are sinners and that Christ died for our sins. And, as the Spirit of God uses that message in the hearts of those to whom we witness, God gives them repentance as they acknowledge the truth of the Gospel and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I know a well-known preacher who has a large church and he has a large radio ministry, *but he intentionally never talks about sin*. So what is there to repent of? And if repentance is essential for salvation, how can anyone be saved listening to him? He may make them feel good by not saying anything about sin, but where in the Bible do you read that our mission is to make people feel good? What would you think of a doctor who discovers that a patient has a fatal disease, but doesn't tell his patient because he wants him to feel good? People know that they don't always do the right thing, or think the right thing, or say the right thing, but they need to be told that it is because they are sinners, not in a harsh and self-righteous way, but so they will know that the Gospel is the very message, the only message, that they need to hear by which they can be saved from the eternal judgment of God in hell.

But what is the rest of the message that the Lord gave to His disciples to preach. It is that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Now I believe that the Bible teaches that some day the Lord Jesus Christ is going to establish His kingdom on earth and rule over all of the nations. But I don't think that is what the Lord was talking about here when He said, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." I think that the kingdom that the Lord was talking about here is salvation, and that it is "at hand" so that sinners can know that we can repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ *right now, and be saved! Today is the day of salvation. We have no assurance that we will have a tomorrow.*

But there is still another point of interest in our passage for tonight. It has to do with the spread of the Gospel.

IV. The Lord's Men (Matt. 4:18-22).

Matthew 4:12-25 (5)

Now we must not think that this was the first time that the Lord had met Peter and Andrew, nor was it the first time that the Lord had met James and John. They were men who knew the Lord, but they were all four of them fishermen. And the Lord was calling them from their trades, to leave the fishing business, to become fishers of men. The Lord was calling them, as we know now, to be not only disciples, but apostles. None of them had the training that the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees would have had. But in calling them the Lord gave them a command and a promise. His word to them was, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

I repeat: I don't think that the Lord was calling them to salvation. But He was calling them to give their lives serving the Lord. We could say that the Lord was calling them into the ministry. They were very simple men, but even though they were not trained to be preachers, the Lord provided for their training when He said, "Follow Me." And the Lord's promise was that He would make them do with others what the Lord had done with them.

You see, there was no Bible school or seminary where they could be trained for the ministry, but they had something which a lot of seminary graduates never learn. And that was found in the word, "Follow Me." No man should be in the ministry who has not been called. The Lord was not looking for volunteers. He preferred to chose the men that He would train to serve Him as these four, and many others, have done.

Now we are not to think from the Lord's choice of these men that he only calls untrained men into the ministry because we know from the Bible that God chose some well educated men, and men who were wealthy. Moses is a good example. But probably some of you who taught Sunday School this morning told your class (or you have told them) three things about Moses.

His life was divided into three periods of forty years each because he lived to be 120. I don't know who originated the titles for the three periods in his life, but it goes like this:

- 1) Moses spent the first forty years of his life as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, learning to be somebody.
- 2) Then he ran ahead of the Lord, killed an Egyptian who was afflicting a Jew, and Moses had to flee for his life, and he spent the next forty years in exile learning to be a nobody.

3) Then God called him out of the burning bush, called him to go back into Egypt where he led the nation Israel out of bondage, but he was learning that God delights to use nobodies.

The one qualification for serving the Lord is that we learn to follow the Lord. And that is a lifelong assignment. To follow the Lord is to walk in fellowship with Him, to learn to know Him, to learn to trust Him, to learn the value of prayer. And a true servant of the Lord is one who teaches others to follow the Lord. This is what we all need to do. And as we follow the Lord, he makes us good fishers of men. If my seminary did not teach me to follow the Lord, I would have been far better off never to have gone to seminary. But I had the privilege of sitting at the feet of men who taught me by their teaching and by their lives what it means to walk with the Lord. And throughout my life God has used many, many people, some men, and many women, who have learned to follow the Lord, and they have been a help to me.

All of us need to ask ourselves, With all that I am doing as a child of God, am I really learning what it means to follow the Lord?

Notice what is said about Peter and Andrew in verse 20, and then what is said about James and John in verse 22.

I have one more point, and it has to do with verses 23, 24, and 25. Why did Matthew, who was one who was called away from his government job to serve the Lord – why did he tell us about all of the teaching and preaching that the Lord went on to do after this? I will tell you what I think that these last verses mean.

You all probably know that following the Lord is not a bed of roses, so to speak. There are doubts that sometimes come into our minds. Failure is experienced by all. We aren't able to reach some of the people we want to reach. This is when we need to take our Bibles and read parts of the four Gospels again.

Let me close with an illustration from the life of John the Baptist. Please turn with me to chapter 11 here in the Gospel of Matthew, and look with me at the first six verses. (Read.)

John the Baptist was in prison. He evidently was wondering, “If the Lord is Who He is, then why am I where I am?” He was so far down that, as

Matthew 4:12-25 (7)

the saying goes, *he had to look up to see bottom*. Notice the Lord's answer in verses 4, 5 and 6.

And then notice the Lord's commendation of John in verse 11.

Concl: This last half of Matthew 4 are full of wonderful truth to help and encourage us and to give us guidance we need in the work of the Lord today, and especially in our fellowship with Him. May the things that are important to the Lord, be important to us today. And whatever our responsibilities may be, let us all make sure that day by day we are learning what it means to follow the Lord.