

“Listen to Jesus’ First Words”

Matthew 4:13-25

First words are important. Most of us probably don’t remember our very first words - and often there is disagreement among our parents as to whether we said ‘mom’ or ‘dad’ first. But when a new leader takes power or there’s a change in a large corporation and a new CEO addresses his employees they want to choose their words carefully so that they make an impact and set a direction for where they want the country or company to go.

What were Jesus’ first public words as He began His ministry? All the gospels are clear that Jesus began His public ministry after He allowed John to baptize Him. Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus’ first public words as being

“Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15).

It is Jesus’ inaugural address. He was setting the stage for the direction of His ministry. It lit a religious and political powder keg in His day that so threatened the Roman and Jewish establishment that they decided together to eliminate Jesus. *“Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

What was Jesus saying when He said those words. We’ve heard them a thousand times no doubt but have we really listened to the power and the radicalness of that state-ment? Let’s listen to Jesus’ first words afresh and understand why they were so powerful then and are still powerful for us today.

At the end of Luke 2, when Jesus was 12-13 years of age, we read,

^{2:52} *And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.*

And then in Luke 3:23 when He was baptized by John we read,

^{3:23} *Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.*

So other than His debating with the Jewish rabbis at His Bar Mitzvah in Luke 2, Jesus remains quiet about His identity and mission. But once John the Baptist arrives and prepares the people for the Messiah, Jesus allows John to baptize Him and shortly after that Jesus begins His ministry while John gets arrested. And Jesus begins with a not-so-subtle message *“Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near”*. Let’s break this sentence down and understand what He’s saying at the time in which He lived.

“Repent” (v.17a)

Meaning: Complete change of attitude about your sin resulting in a complete change of direction in your life (3:7-10)

That’s what the Greek word *metanoia* means. An inner attitudinal change resulting in external change in actions. We see this illustrated quite well in Matt. 3 when John the Baptist came before

Jesus, preaching the same message. Crowds were coming to hear John speak but not everyone was interested in doing what he was saying. In 3:7-10 we read,

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The religious leaders had a self-righteous attitude where they felt their Jewish lineage automatically saved them, so they rejected John's message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. John strongly charged the religious leaders with the need to repent of sinful self-righteousness and demonstrate fruit by changes in their life. In Luke's account of John's preaching, he recorded the questions from the people, some soldiers and some tax collectors all, having been convicted of their sins, asked John 'What then should we do?' and John told them what external actions (fruit) would show a changed heart.

So John the Baptist comes prior to Jesus preparing them for Jesus' coming. Jesus comes along and preaches the same message and Matthew links Jesus' coming to a specific event.

The timing: Showed that Jesus' message was in full agreement with the Scriptures

¹²When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.

It was Herod – not the religious leaders – who had John imprisoned because he had spoken publicly against Herod's luring his half-brother Philip's wife, Herodias away from Philip. John was ministering in the south on the east side of the Jordan probably closer to Jericho (about 25 km from Jerusalem). Jesus has returned homeward; first Nazareth (150 km north of Jerusalem) but He settled (literally moved) east in Capernaum (50 km from Nazareth) on the north shore of Galilee. Matthew is always pointing out how Jesus fulfilled Scripture and here he quotes Is. 9:1-2 where we read,

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan— ²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

And so this is the future, when Jesus would honour Galilee (the land originally deeded to Zebulun and Naphtali, two of Jacob's 12 sons) and being the light that dawned on them (and the world). Here's something we have to remember; when the New Testament writers quote an Old Testament passage they imply the context around the passage. Is. 9:1-2 is the beginning of a small section. Here's what vv.3-7 say,

³You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. ⁴For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. ⁵Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. ⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it

with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

The prophecy in Is. 9 refers to the coming of the Messianic King to Galilee to establish His rule! And what Matthew write immediately after he quotes Is. 9:1-2 (with the understanding that his audience knows what Is. 9:1-7 says),

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

Jesus wasn't only fulfilling Is. 9; He and John the Baptist were fulfilling Is. 40:3 (which Matthew quoted in ch. 3:3). But again what does Is. 40:1-11 say,

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." ⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Again Jesus is fulfilling more prophecy that He would come after the forerunner and bring good news to Israel, coming with power, tending His flock like a shepherd and that this shepherd is God Himself. And we haven't even went to the Malachi prophecy which Gabriel quoted to John's father Zechariah, who would come and turn the hearts of the fathers to their children (Luke 1:17). And he prepares their hearts by calling them to repent.

So, by making His first message 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near', He is lining Himself up with the prophets and as the one who follows John the Baptist, Jesus is already alluding to being the Messiah and ushering in the Kingdom.

But what is the kingdom? We read it and use it but do we know what it means?

"For the Kingdom of Heaven" (v.17b)

The reason why people should repent is because the kingdom of heaven has come. Don't confuse kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God; they are the same thing. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and so He substitutes heaven for God, a common practice even today among religious Jews who are careful with using God's Name. But what is the kingdom of God? A kingdom has to have a king and people to rule. So the kingdom of God is . . .

Meaning: The rule of God through the reign of His King with His willing subjects

Is this how Scripture defines it? Two chapters later Jesus taught the disciples to pray to God,

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus calls God 'our Father', so we are God's subjects who with and through the power of our King (Jesus) carry out God's will here. God's kingdom is not like an earthly kingdom. When Pilate questioned Jesus about who He was and understood Jesus was some kind of King, he said to Jesus in John 18

"Are you the king of the Jews?"³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

The Kingdom of God originates from God, who has established Jesus as the rightful ruler of the world He has made, but His subjects are those who testify to the truth that Jesus, the Son of God became a man and came to earth to accomplish God's will- which was to die for our sins. The amazing thing about Jesus' statement though is the word 'preach'. This does not mean He simply taught people in nice little gatherings. No the word preach means to 'declare'. Here's

The Declaration: It has dawned (v.17a; 4:23; Luke 4:16-21)

Jesus made a bold statement when He said 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand/near'. He declared it. He was issuing a challenge to those who doubted, rejected and were threatened by His statement and His ministry. V. 23 says He went throughout the area teaching and 'proclaiming' the good news of the Kingdom. In Luke's account, he states that Jesus began His ministry proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and returned to Nazareth. And on a Sabbath He went into the synagogue as He always did and they handed Him the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus, hometown boy, now beginning to live a life as a Rabbi was given the opportunity to read and comment on the Torah reading. We're not sure if the reading happened to be Is. 61 (I think He turned there purposely because the people fixated on Him after He read this) but He reads,

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor

And then He declares "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in Your hearing." Jesus began His ministry identifying Himself completely with John's message declaring that the Kingdom has arrived and essentially He is the king.

"Has Come Near" (v.17b)

The word for "come near" actually comes before 'kingdom of heaven' in the Greek, which literally reads, "*Repent you, for has drawn near the kingdom of the heavens.*" The word order puts the emphasis on 'has come near'. The verb 'has come' is what is called the perfect tense which is fascinating. If it was the past tense it would simply mean 'it came at one time' like I went to the store yesterday. The perfect tense means it came and its effects are continually happening now and always will be.

The implications are huge for us because we get discouraged waiting for Jesus to come back and establish His kingdom but in essence He already inaugurated the kingdom when He first came and its effects are continually with us and it will continually come, until one day the world will come under the reign of Jesus. We know there's a future more complete aspect to the rule of God through Jesus with His subjects coming because at the last supper He promised His followers that he would not drink of the vine until *"that day when I drink it anew in My father's Kingdom."* So while we're waiting for the world to completely bend the knee to Jesus, how can we be assured that it will truly come?

Evidence: People make complete changes in their lives to follow Jesus. (vv.18-22)

After Jesus declares the kingdom is near He calls two sets of brothers from their fishing nets. First Peter and Andrew who were casting their nets at that moment. When Rabbi Jesus called them to follow Him *"At once they left their nets and followed Him."* The word for 'left' is the same word used for divorce. Get the picture? They cut themselves off from fishing to follow Jesus. This is a picture of real repentance. A complete change of attitude about their sin resulting in complete change of direction in their life. Why do I say sin here? If we read Luke 5 account of Peter's calling, Jesus provides him with a miraculous catch of fish resulting in Peter acknowledging his sinfulness.

Then Jesus calls James and John while they were preparing or mending their nets. And they dropped the nets and left dad in the boat. Another complete change of attitude resulting in a complete change of direction. These men understood the cost of following the Rabbi. Most Jewish boys grew up going to Torah school learning the Hebrew Scriptures. After their Bar Mitzvah, the smarter ones advanced to the next level and when they graduated from that they applied to sit under a Rabbi of their choosing. But if the Rabbi rejected them, then they were done and would go home and learn a trade. So Peter, Andrew, James, John and all those Jesus called were sons who weren't good enough and didn't measure up to other Rabbi's standards. But Jesus comes along and says 'I'm choosing you.' Even the night before he died He reminded them of this in John 15:16

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last— and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

Once you follow a Rabbi you become His disciple. You live with Him. You study Him. You imitate Him. The best word to define disciple is apprentice. You follow Him and learn from Him and do what He does. This is what Jesus expects from us as well. He has come to live in us by His Spirit, so he is always with us and we are always with Him. We have to abide/remain/dwell with Him studying His teachings and imitating His life until we are completely conformed to His likeness at the end of our life.

Does Jesus dwell in you? Have you repented – going in a completely different direction then the world (and sometimes how we used to live ourselves)? Is the fruit of repentance – the evidence of Jesus-like attitudes and actions evident in our life?

There was more evidence that the Kingdom of heaven had begun already:

Evidence: The power and the presence of the Kingdom advances (vv.23-25)

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming 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 healed people because it fulfilled the prophecies that this is what the Messiah would do to validate who He was. Jesus also healed those who came to Him in faith to join His Kingdom and become part of this new family or society that will one day overtake the entire world. Even here the gospel was spreading from Galilee to Syria, Decapolis in the East, Jerusalem and Judea in the south. Jesus would tell parables about the spread of His Kingdom in Matt. 13 that it's like a tiny mustard seed that starts out small but grows into the largest of plants even becoming a tree where birds can nest (13:31-32).

The Kingdom of the heavens (plural because it refers to all levels of existence) has come, started when Jesus declared it and healed people and called disciples and died for our sins, negating Satan's power over death and control over Jesus' disciples. His first words are still relevant. If we haven't joined the Kingdom of God then we need to repent of our sins. Acknowledge we don't measure up to follow the Rabbi but humbly accept His invitation to come after Him. Though most of us have already accepted that invitation there's always the need for daily repentance when we've gotten side-tracked and distracted by this world; the things under this heaven/ atmosphere. Repent, change direction and show you mean it by producing fruit/evidence in keeping with repentance.

The evidence of the Kingdom's existence is evident when Jesus' subjects - you and me – submit to His will and Word. Our changed lives declare to the people around us Jesus has come and changed our lives. We can graciously declare who Jesus is, knowing He will return and finish what He started. He has chosen us to represent Him to a lost world around us. We don't have to be afraid to do that because He never leaves us nor forsakes us by dwelling within us.

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