



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Beginning of the King’s Ministry,” Matthew 4:12-25 – TRANSCRIPT

We turn again this morning to the Gospel of Matthew, and our Scripture reading is found in the 4th chapter. We’re beginning at the 12th verse and reading through the 25th. Matthew chapter 4 verse 12 through 25. As you read along with me in the Scripture reading, you’ll notice that this is the section in which we have the beginning of the ministry of King Messiah. Matthew chapter 4 verse 12 through verse 25,

“Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, the land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations; The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up. From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, ‘Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers

of men.’ And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed him. And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, (incidentally, that is not a different gospel but an application of the gospel to the coming Messianic kingdom) and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And his fame went throughout all Syria, and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with diverse diseases and torments, and those who were possessed with devils, and those who were lunatic, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them. And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan.”

May God bless the reading of his word.

The subject for this morning as we continue our series of studies in the Gospel of Matthew is “The Beginning of the King’s Ministry.” And the verses that we have read for our Scripture reading are a summary of our Lord’s early Messianic ministry in Galilee. The impression given as you read through these verses we have read is that of a triumphal progress of a newly appointed Messiah. He sweeps through the northern regions amid popular enthusiasm, and there are bursts of fresh spiritual power as the Lord Jesus begins and continues his early ministry. As Alexander McLaren said, “It was roses, roses all the way in these early days, but they withered soon.

The beginning of the ministry is characterized, as you can see, by Matthew’s analysis of the fact that the Lord Jesus began this ministry in Galilee. It is characterized by

the call of some of his earliest disciples, for a king, of course, must have his subjects. And finally by brief description of some of the things that chiefly characterized it.

I think if we were to attempt to analyze the verses, or wish to analyze them, we should say that there are three major points in them. And they combine to testify to the wise and sovereign power of a very sensitive king. He is his own herald, so we learn in verses 12 through 17. He calls his own disciples, we learn in verse 18 through verse 22. And then we learn that he wields his own power and is welcomed by his elect subjects, and that his ministry begins with an early enthusiasm on the part of those who have, probably for a long time, been longing to hear some authoritative word from God.

All the needed preparations for the ministry have now been finished by the conclusion of the temptation. We have learned that his genealogy is impeccable. We have seen in the description of his birth that the supernatural power of God is evident in it, for he was born of a virgin. We have also seen him worshipped by Gentiles in token of the successful conclusion of his ministry in the ages to come. We have seen him protected by the power of God from wicked King Herod. We have also seen the ministry of the forerunner, who has, as his task, the announcement of the coming of the king, and also an evaluation of that king, for he states that the one who comes after him is greater or mightier than he, and he is not worthy to loose the sandals that are upon his feet. And then we have seen the king crowned in his baptism, and that coronation formula, those beautiful expressive words that God spoke from heaven, tell us what he is and what he shall do: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” He is the eternal Son. He is also the Messianic king. And further, his work shall be the work of suffering and dying. He shall take up the mission of the suffering servant of Jehovah. God’s elect servant, the one servant who is chosen and elect above all others, and who climaxes his ministry in the substitutionary atoning death described in the 53rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah.

And then as if to point out to all concerned that this Messianic king is a truly qualified king, God allows his servant to be led into the wilderness by the Spirit and to be tested by the devil himself. He succeeds. He is successful, and the angels come and minister to him, and now it would seem that immediately his Messianic ministry should begin.

The coming into Galilee comes as a little bit of a surprise, then, because it’s evident that about a year intervenes between the testing and the beginning of this ministry in Galilee. Matthew omits that early Judean ministry which is described in the Gospel of John, and evidently, the reason he omits it is because the official ministry begins in Galilee, and that early informal ministry described in the earlier chapters in the Gospel of John is important, but it is not the important official ministry which begins with the forerunner’s end.

Now if you were looking at this text carefully, the 12th verse, you’d notice that the key thing for the Lord Jesus is the casting into prison of John the Baptist. That is the clue that lets him know that his ministry is just about to begin. We read, “Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee.” And then when he came to Galilee, he evidently came first to Nazareth, but determined by the guidance of God his ministry should have as its center Capernaum over on the Sea of Galilee: “And so leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum which is upon the seacoast in the borders of Zebulon and Naphtali.”

The motive of the coming of the Lord Jesus is described definitely, I say, by those opening words of verse 12: “Now when Jesus had heard that John had been cast into prison.” He understood John’s words which John had spoken in his presence, “I baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who cometh after me is mightier than I.” He knew that he was the one who should come after John the Baptist. So when word came that John has now been cast into prison, and that his ministry is at an end, guided by the Holy Spirit and also his reflection upon the words of the Baptist himself, he knows that it

is time now for his ministry to begin. It is evident that he knows not only who he is, but what he shall do.

There probably are also other reasons for the statement that he departed into Galilee. Undoubtedly, as you read those opening chapters in the Gospel of John, you would gain the impression that if things did not stop in one way or another, he would be immediately proclaimed Messiah in those early days in Judea. And evidently it was not the purpose of God, and our Lord recognized this that that should happen. It would be a kind of premature crisis for that to happen. He must die – he knows he must die – but he must die at the appointed hour. That’s why in the Gospel of John we read so often that he knew his hour would come, but he also knew that the hour had not been reached at certain points in his ministry. And then at another point, later on, he did come to know that his hour had come. So he avoided the premature crisis that would be reached too early and went into Galilee.

But probably also, even more important is that the Lord Jesus knew, from the study of the word of God, that his ministry had to begin in Galilee. He had read Isaiah, he had read the 9th chapter, and the text that Matthew cites here he knew and knew very well. And he knew that the opening of the official Messianic ministry would take place in Galilee. And that’s the thing that strikes the Evangelist Matthew, because in his commentary on the Lord’s movement from the south to the north, he makes the point that it begins in Galilee, in the very region where the Assyrians brought terror and doom to the children of Israel hundreds of years before in the 8th Century Before Christ. Matthew and Isaiah see the Messianic light arising in Galilee of the Gentiles.

It’s evident as you read verses 14 though 16, I think, that this is of significance for not only the Prophet Isaiah but also the Evangelist Matthew. He sees that there is a geographical purpose in the Lord Jesus beginning his ministry in the north, because that is the prophesied place at which he should begin. But I think you can also notice that there is a distinct spiritual appropriateness for the beginning of the ministry of the north. Notice

this very interesting and very significant description of the spiritual status of people in the north. He says, he speaks of the land Zebulon, the land of Naphtali, he speaks of Galilee of the nations, and then he says, “The people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and to them that sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up.”

There’s something very impressive about this long, drawn out accumulation of geographical names. And the word “the people” in verse 16 is apposition with them. The land of Zebulon, the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations – he groups them all together, masses them all together in one sad description of their sitting in inert darkness. And then adds something that is more significant, when he states that they sat in the region and shadow of death – there is a kind of paralysis he sees which falls on this highest activities of the spirit if the light from God has been quenched. And the light from God has evidently been quenched among the people who he describes. It’s only wild beasts that are active in the night, and so this is a very gloomy and doleful picture of the spiritual condition of the citizens of the region of Galilee. As a matter of fact, it is even deeper than that. Because what we have here is the description of two great and important truths which, if we do not understand, we shall never understand the word of God. And the first is the doctrine of total depravity.

Notice the descriptions of the peoples: they sit in darkness; they sit in the region of shadow and death. Now we must be careful when we use the term “total depravity” to be sure that we understand all that is meant by it. I am quite sure that a number of people, who hear the term total depravity for the first time misunderstand the theological significance of the term. It does not mean, first of all, that men and all men are as bad as they could be. There is a distinction in the wickedness of men, in degree. There are some men who are more wicked than others. Total depravity does not mean that you are as bad as you could be. Now of course, were it not for the restraining power of the Holy Spirit, you would be a great deal worse than you are. But total depravity does not mean that we are as bad as we could be.

It does not mean that we have no knowledge of God’s will, nor that we have no sense of conscience. It does not mean that man is incapable of disinterested affections and actions toward other men. It does not mean that there are no philanthropic men who are a blessing to their community in material ways. We are grateful for the activities of men who have been the benefactors of the community in which they live. Total depravity does not mean that there are no such men.

Total depravity does not mean that every man will commit every sin. It simply means that the corruption that has descended upon the human spirit as a result of the fall in the Garden of Eden touches every part of our nature. It touches our minds, and so we are blinded. It touches our emotions and so they are corrupt. It touches our wills, and so we are in rebellion against God. In other words, it means that the corruption which has come as a result of the act in the Garden of Eden is a corruption that has so touched our whole nature – our total human nature – that we cannot save ourselves.

We cannot recuperate ourselves. We cannot perform spiritual good that is acceptable to God. It is true to say that God is not in all of our thoughts before we have come to know Jesus Christ. We are helpless. The disease of sin has affected all of my members. In summary, it means that we are spiritually dead. That’s what we mean when we say we are totally depraved.

Now the Scriptures make that so plain it is very difficult to understand how, if we believe the Scriptures, we can fail to see it. But of course, the fact that we are depraved and we are blinded means that it is very difficult for those who do not read the Scriptures to understand anything of this. And so they blithely pass their lives with the conviction that deep down in the human heart we are good, and God must honor the goodness that he sees there.

That is not true to human experience. That is not true to anyone who thinks deeply. It’s not even true to those who have no understanding of Scripture but who have yet looked deep down into the human heart. Dostoyevsky, in one of his darker

moments, wrote that there never was a crime that I could not conceive of committing myself. That’s a pretty good analysis of not only his nature but human nature.

Now a second truth that comes before us is the related truth. It’s the related truth of human inability. That is, we cannot recover ourselves by our own efforts, or by our free will. It comes as a startling surprise to a lot of people. I can remember when it came to me as a startling surprise that the word of God does not teach that we have free will. And then it comes as a very startling surprise to discover that mainline Christianity – if we are to use that term – down through the centuries has never believed in the doctrine of free will either, because it is so predominant in the preaching of evangelicalism in the 20th Century.

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church express it pointedly: “The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith in calling upon God.” We cannot of ourselves bring ourselves to faith. We cannot out of our own free will express a decision that is acceptable to God.

The Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Churches has expressed it even better, because it is more direct and full. The Westminster Confession puts it this way: “Man, by his fall and his state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.’ In other words, there is no possible way in which we might make a decision of the will that will bring spiritual good of ourselves. The Confession goes on to say, “So, as a natural man, being averse from that good and dead in sin is not able by his own strength to convert himself or to prepare himself there unto.”

So, not only is man unable to exercise his free will to any spiritual good, but he is unable to convert himself or even to prepare himself for salvation. So here we have in the beautiful picture of the Galileans – and the Galileans are only typical of us all – a

people who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, it’s a beautiful picture of human nature before the knowledge of the Lord Jesus comes.

Now, in case there are some Lutherans in the audience, I know you would like a testimony from Luther. And if you know Luther you know he was a very coarse man by our standards in the 20th Century. We are very sweet, and we are very nice. And so we never use these frank words that Martin Luther did in his day. Now we must remember two things about Luther. He was a very forthright man, and furthermore, he lived in an age when some of the words were very common, and just as common as our nicer words are to us today. And so I want to introduce his statement. I want you to get the force of it, but I don’t want you to be turned away by the coarseness of it [laughter]. This is what Luther said: “To believe in free will is to vomit out a thousand blasphemies in the face of God.”

In other words, what we have then is a beautiful conjunction of the teaching of holy Scripture and the teaching of the historic Christian church that man is depraved and unable to prepare himself for salvation. Then how can he possibly be saved? By God. By God, through Christ.

So this is a beautiful description. I love it, because it’s beautifully descriptive of my own personal condition before I came to know Jesus Christ as Savior. When I was sitting in the insurance business in Birmingham, Alabama, a member in good standing of the Southern Presbyterian Church, I really was sitting in darkness and in the region and shadow of death. And by the grace of God, the light of the gospel came to me in my condition of depravity and inability. And through the marvelous power of the grace of God, I was brought to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. And everyone who has ever had that experience is able to rejoice and sing, O gift of gifts, O grace of faith, my God how can it be, that Thou who hast discerning love should give that gift to me? Ah grace into unlikeliest hearts, it is thy boast to come, the glory of thy light to find in darkest spots, a home.

Now Matthew describes the message that the Lord Jesus gives when he comes into Galilee, and you notice immediately that it’s the same message that John the Baptist had preached. He comes and he says, “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand.” When men are hopeless, then undeserved grace comes. And here the public ministry of the Lord Jesus begins.

Now, of course, we notice later this same expression, “from that time.” And I want you to turn with me, if you will, over to the 16th chapter and 21st verse of this Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 16 and verse 21. Notice the same expression, “From that time”—you’ll recognize the context is the context of Peter’s confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi. It was one of the climaxes of the ministry of Christ, and after Peter had been asked for his confession, and he had replied, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” the Lord Jesus gave mention of a few facts concerning the church and then we read, “From that time forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples how he must go unto Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised again the third day.”

Now if you don’t mind underlining in your Bible, you can put a little line under “from that time” and then draw the little line to the margin and put chapter 4 verse 17. And in chapter 4 verse 17 you can do the same thing for chapter 16 verse 21. Those two expressions, “from that time” in chapter 4 verse 17, and “from that time” in chapter 16 verse 21 mark off the public and private aspects of the ministry of the Messiah. Here begins the public aspect of the ministry, and it is a ministry of announcement of the coming of the kingdom of the heavens.

And then in the private ministry which the King unfolds from chapter 16 on, the dominant note is the note of his sufferings which must take place in Jerusalem in order that the kingdom’s foundation may be laid in the shedding of blood. Now the text of Scripture says, “Now from that time, Jesus began to preach.” That also is an interesting

word, because it means, really “to herald,” “to proclaim.” It’s the picture of an individual who goes out with a very important message and shouts it out.

Now in the year of the bicentennial, we ought to know exactly what something like that means. It’s a Paul Revere kind of message. Jesus began to herald, “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand.” Now a herald’s message has two or three notes about it. And first of all, it has the note of certainty. When a herald goes out to proclaim something, he doesn’t say, now, perhaps the British are coming; probably they are; maybe they will. But a herald goes out, and immediately you expect something that is certain. And you can see in our Lord’s ministry the compressed character of it and the definiteness that there was a sense of certainty about the ministry of the Lord Jesus.

I’ve always felt, and I still feel, that a sense of certainty is characteristic of the message of the word of God. You do not have maybes and probablies and it seems, in holy Scripture. There is a definiteness and a certainty about its words, and you should expect the man of God who teaches Scripture to have a note of certainty in his message. That does not mean, of course, that us human beings who are not inspired, such as the apostles and prophets were, should not occasionally say, “I’m not sure of the meaning of this text.” But if we are true ambassadors of the Lord Jesus, there should be a sense of certainty about the major aspects of the ministry that we proclaim.

Even Goethe, who did not know anything about spiritual things, said to the individuals who spoke to him, “Tell me of your certainties, I have doubts enough of my own.” And we want to hear the certainties of holy Scripture. They are found in the New Testament and the Old Testament, and they characterize the message of a herald.

There is a second note, the note of authority. Someone once said concerning a well-known preacher, “He did not cloudily guess. He knew.” And our Lord Jesus spoke with certainty and he spoke with authority. This was the thing that amazed, as we shall see, amazed the people of his day. He did not come like the scribes and the Pharisees. He did not come like the students of the Rabbis and say, Rabbi so-and-so says this, but

Rabbi such-and-such says that. Rabbi so-and-so says this and Rabbi such-and-such says that.

In fact, when you are asked, if you had been there, “What is the characteristic thing of his ministry?,” you most likely would have said he doesn’t teach like the scribes and the Pharisees. He teaches as one who has authority. And that is precisely what he said. He was a man who had authority. He knew what he was talking about, and he knew that he knew.

And of course, there is the note of representation, for he is a herald. And he represents, as the Messianic king, the Lord God himself. Repent, I say, this is the message of God, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand.

Now, repentance, of course, is something that we cannot produce. We have just said that it is impossible for men to supply faith. It is impossible for men to prepare themselves for salvation. We cannot of ourselves repent. The holy Scriptures tell us, however, that repentance is a gift of God. And in Acts chapter 5 and verse 31 this is spelled out. There we read, “Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

And then again in the 11th chapter, the same teaching, “When they had heard these things, they held their peace and glorified God, saying, ‘Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted (given) repentance to life.’” So repentance is the gift of God.

Now let me assure you, my dear friend sitting in the audience, sitting in the shadow of death and in the region of death – if that be your condition. If the Holy Spirit has brought to your heart a desire to know God, you can be sure as you appeal to him that he will give the gift of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus. He has never refused anyone who has cried out to him for faith and repentance. It is always given, infallibly given, to everyone whose heart has been stirred.

But then, of course, if you are not interested in repentance and faith, then what excuse can you possibly have if God leaves you where you wish to be. So you can be

sure, that if there is within your heart the desire to know God, to experience repentance, to have faith in the Lord Jesus, he will give it. And it comes by grace. And it is given to all of his elect individuals. Repent, then—that’s a command—repent for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand; a word especially adaptable as we pointed out a few Sundays ago to the Jewish people.

Now following this, we have the story of the call of the four Galileans. Galilee was one of the loveliest lakes in the eastern world. It’s not surprising that God comforted the Messiah with the habitation around the Sea of Galilee. Now this is not the first meeting of the Lord Jesus with Peter and Andrew and with James and John. The first meeting is described in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. There they came to know him, and evidently to know him as the Messiah who would save the Israelites who responded in faith. Here he calls them amid their secular occupations to service. Salvation has taken place earlier, but now they are called to service.

So, if the king is to have a kingdom, it would be natural to expect that he should have disciples. So as he begins his ministry, he begins to call his disciples. And incidentally, you notice that he *calls* them.

So he finds, first, Peter and Andrew who were casting nets into the sea because they were fishermen. Beautiful little picture of the call of God, and a beautiful little story of how they responded to him. After Peter and Andrew have responded, he speaks to them and says, “Follow me, for I will make you fishers of men.” Straightway they leave their nets and follow him. They leave from there, and he also calls James and John.

Incidentally, notice very definitely that the initiative comes from the King. They do not crowd round asking to be one of his disciples; he calls them to that service. And also, they are not the wise and cultured and noble of their day. The Lord Jesus does not always call the wise and the noble. He calls a few. But generally speaking, his saints and his elect ones are the ordinary people. He calls them to become fishers of men – I think women are included there, too, don’t you?

This is an interesting analogy, fishing and winning souls. Now I am not a fisherman. I hope, if there are followers of Isaac Walton in the audience, you’ll pardon my references, because you’ll immediately discern that I am a total amateur as far as fish are concerned. But looking at fishermen, and I’ve looked at a lot of them through the years, and I have some very close friends who seem to be so taken up with this exercise that it forms a large part of their life (I’m not being critical, incidentally; I think men ought to have something like that, I just wonder why it’s fishing [laughter] and not something else).

I think its much more fun to get out on the golf course and knock that ball around and try to get it in that little cup. [Laughter] Now it seems to me that’s an intellectual exercise. [More Laughter] But fishing; but the Lord Jesus, unfortunately, chose fishing and not golf as an illustration. So I have to acknowledge the superiority of fishing; it has tradition behind it.

Now, I don’t know – I say anything about fishermen – but I do know that it requires a great deal of patience. I discovered that the first time I ever tried to fish. I put my line in, I expected the fish to bite. Nobody went around heralding, “S. Lewis Johnson is here. He’s just dropped his hook. Wouldn’t you like to be on his line?” [Laughter] Evidently, word went out precisely the opposite. I couldn’t get any fish to get on that line. I discovered that patience is needed. I discovered also that perseverance is needed, too. You have to keep everlastingly at it. And all of these things are, of course, designed to express the things that are important in the fishing for men.

Not only perseverance, but courage. There are some fisherman who have to make their living by fishing, who undergo danger almost every day. I stood on the banks of the North Sea in Scotland, and watched some of those fishing boats come in, and the weather is not good over there, and the storms can be awfully bad, and they can come up very suddenly. And their very small, little boats can be easily capsized. It’s very easy to lose one’s life. It’s a task that requires courage. And the fishing for men is a task that requires

courage, because anyone who has ever attempted to be a testimony for Jesus Christ knows that it’s not pleasant, generally speaking, to be a forthright witness for Jesus Christ. There is a great deal of scorn. There’s a great deal of sneering. There is a great deal of rebellion. There is a great deal of rejection.

Fishing requires equipment. No man can do a good job of witnessing for Jesus Christ who doesn’t have the proper tackle. Now, the proper tackle spiritually is the knowledge of the word of God. It’s impossible for us to be an effective servant of Jesus Christ if we do not know anything about the Scriptures. How ridiculous for us to be heralds and messengers of the Lord Jesus and not know our message. It’s impossible to be that kind of witness – an effective one – if we do not have our equipment.

And of course, it’s good to have an example. I doubt that there’s anyone who’s ever learned to fish without the observance or observation of an example. Usually, one’s father is his teacher in the art of fishing. And in the case of spiritual ministry, the Lord Jesus spoke to these men and said, come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.

And, of course, we need experience. Experience in the witnessing is just as important as experience in fishing. I don’t know a great deal about fishing I say, but I did learn some things in my few endeavors out on the water. I discovered it was not a good thing to fish during the time of the day when I liked to be up, in the middle of the day. I discovered that it was much better to fish in the time of the day when I didn’t like to be up, early in the morning.

The first time I ever went fishing in Texas—I’ll never forget; some man asked me because I was his preacher to go north to Lake Texoma and go fish with him. I thought that would be wonderful rest and relaxation, until he got me up at 4:30 the first morning [laughter] and we had to get out on the lake while it was still dark. That’s when the fish bite, he said. I was not too interested in catching fish, but I discovered that if you’re going to catch fish, you have to know those things. You have to know that the fish in the

morning are in the shadows feeding – I think. [Laughter] And then you have to know that in the middle of the day they’re down deep where it’s cool. So experience is necessary.

Exercise. We have to do it, too. You can know all about it theoretically, but if you’ve never been out there and come to know what it is by experience, you cannot be a good fisherman.

Now I know that there are some who say that there is one other qualification for being a fisherman. And that is, you have to be a good liar. Now I’d like to say a word for the fisherman. You don’t need to know how to lie. Fishermen don’t lie; they just remember big. [Laughter]

There is one important thing here that I think we should note. In the word of winning souls for Jesus Christ, to which the Lord Jesus refers here, it is extremely important that we recognize that only that that is done by the guidance of the Holy Spirit will ultimately count.

Some years ago, I read a story about a man who lived in the Highlands of Scotland. His name was John Cameron. He was marvelously used by God in the salvation of many in that part of Scotland, and a preacher by the name of Oswald Chambers was a friend of his. Mr. Chambers has told the story of how he visited him one summer. And John Cameron said to him, as they began their visit together, “If you get permission to talk to my ploughman, talk to him about his soul.”

And Mr. Chambers said, “I did probably what you would do, I said, ‘Why don’t you talk to him yourself?’” And he said, “John Cameron said to me, ‘Didn’t I say, if you get permission?’ If you don’t know anything about getting permission, you don’t know anything about the Holy Ghost. Do you think I talk to everyone I meet? If I did, I would make God a liar. No, I have to get permission before I talk to a soul.” He’d been a great soul-winner in that part of the land.

And that ploughman had been with John Cameron for three years, and John had never yet spoken to him. Everyday they were together. They went over the hills of

Scotland. They worked the sheep. Never once did John Cameron, known for his soul-winning, speak to his ploughman. Until finally one day, as they were together, after three years, the ploughman burst out and said, “For God’s sake, John, talk to me about my soul or I’ll be in hell!” And so he talked to him and the man was converted to the Lord Jesus.

And then he asked John Cameron why he had not spoken to him about his soul, because they’d often been in the presence of other people, and John had spoken to other people, and they had been converted. He said, “Well, probably you know better than I, I was not given permission to speak to you.”

And then Ploughman said, “When you feed me (that’s good Scottish for when you employed me), when you feed me, I knew you are religious man, and I said to some of my mates, ‘If ol’John talks to me about my soul, I’ll let him know what he’s doing.’” And so for three years, the Holy Spirit never gave him permission to speak to that man about his soul until finally, the Holy Spirit had prepared his heart, and it was so simple to lead him to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as it is to reach up and pick an orange off of an orange tree.

So the administering of the word of God is not ministering where we think it is needed. The word has to be sown in living touch with the Lord of the Harvest, the Holy Spirit.

The last few verses of this section give us the character of the Galilean ministry of the Lord Jesus, and they epitomize this ministry with its threefold outreach. He had a ministry of teaching. Teaching is the explanation of the message. He had a ministry of preaching, which is the proclamation, as I’ve said, of the message. And further, he had a ministry of healing, which were miracles designed to identify the Messiah.

Incidentally, you’ll notice that the Lord Jesus was able to enter into the synagogues and speak. They were the popular universities of their day, it has been said. It was there that the people who liked to study the word of God gathered. The synagogue service

was very simple. It’s very significant, too, because the services of the local church in New Testament times have been built, largely, around the ministry of the synagogues.

For in the synagogue it was proper, common, to have first some prayers that were uttered. Then there was the reading of the law and the prophets. And then there was a sermon. But now, anyone could speak in the services of the synagogue. There was a ruler of synagogue, but he did not determine who was to speak, as if he were the arranger of the speakers, but he was responsible for the general conduct of it all. But when they gathered in their meetings, the men who knew Scripture were free to rise and speak.

You’ll recognize this is set forth in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth, and he stood up to read, and he gave them the Old Testament Scriptures. And he read from the law and the prophets, and he sat down and expounded to them the significance of the passage he had read.

When the Apostle Paul and the men who were with him went to Antioch in Pisidia, they were recognized as students of holy Scripture, and at the time in the service, when it was proper for those who knew Scripture to stand up and expound it, they were spoken to. And you’ll remember the words were something like this: if you brethren have a word of exhortation for us, stand up and give it to us. That’s how the Lord Jesus had an open door in the synagogues, and that’s how the apostles had an open door in the synagogues.

And that is why in the meetings of the church, in New Testament times, it was a free meeting in which the saints gathered. They observed the Lord’s Supper, because that was new, but all the gifted men, the students in the Scriptures, has freedom to stand upon their feet and to express that which the Holy Spirit was leading them to teach. That’s why in the meeting in Believer’s Chapel on Sunday night, there is freedom to stand up. It is something that was brought over from synagogue life that was brought into the early church, and it is scriptural. All other types of meetings in which ministry is limited to one

man – and I don’t mean that we may not have such meetings, but that we should have a meeting in which it is not so – really are quenching of the Spirit of God, and that is what Paul means in 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 19 when he says, “Quench not the Spirit.” He adds, “Despise not prophesyings.” So the Lord Jesus went about standing up in the synagogues, as long as they permitted him to, expounding the truth.

May I close with just a word of application? We have here a plain and pointed picture of the lost. They are blind and unable to recover themselves, and we have a touching and telling picture of grace bringing light, and the response of these unlikely men. Their obedience – did you notice, incidentally, that they responded immediately, John and James and Peter and Andrew – that testifies to the commanding presence of the Lord Jesus.

And finally, did you notice the constraining picture of the love of God that is expressed in, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” For that expresses the desire of God, that men be saved, and that we participate in that work with him. And in the Proverbs we read, “He that winneth souls is wise.” May God speak to the hearts of believers here, to that end.

If you’re here, and you’ve never believed in the Lord Jesus, we invite you to come to him whom to know is life eternal. Shall we bow in a closing word of prayer?

[Prayer] And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit be and abide with all who know him in sincerity.

And O Father, if there should be someone here who does not know him who to know is life eternal, may the truths of his suffering death for sinners grip their hearts, and may they come in faith to him who to know is life eternal.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

“The Beginning of the King’s Ministry” by S. Lewis Johnson
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