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Matthew 4:12-23

Introduction

An early theme in Matthew's gospel is the connection between the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. John makes this connection clear in his baptismal ministry at the Jordan River. He declares that the Kingdom is at hand and that the promised messiah is coming. And, as king, he will come into his kingdom and judge how the stewards of that kingdom have stewarded the kingdom in his absence.

The picture that John paints is not a hopeful one. John condemns the leadership of Israel as wicked stewards who have used their positions to take advantage of the poor rather than to serve God and man faithfully.

John calls men to prepare themselves for the advent of the king who comes **in judgement**. John states that "the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." and "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The question to the reader then becomes, "how does the beginning of Jesus' ministry fulfill the **judgement** that John the Baptist predicts?"

To most people, the scenes of Jesus' early ministry in Galilee don't look like judgement.

However, when one looks at the details, these scenes present the beginning of judgement.

The three scenes in our reading this morning show three different ways that Jesus' ministry fulfills the judgement John the Baptist predicted:

1. Judgement is seen by the **location of Jesus' ministry** in Galilee (vv. 12-17)

2. Judgement is seen by the way that Jesus' **calls his disciples** (vv. 18-22)
3. Judgement is seen in the way that **Jesus' fame spreads** (vv. 23-25)

The Location of Jesus' Ministry (vv. 12-17)

The first thing one sees is the location of Jesus' ministry. ***When Jesus heard that John the baptist had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. Jesus left Nazareth and went to Capernaum by the sea in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.***

It is the quotations from Isaiah that make it clear that Jesus' movement into this region is a judgement against the leadership of Israel in his day.

The first thing to notice is that when Joseph and Mary returned to the land from Egypt they lived in Nazareth which is already "out of the way". The center of the religious, cultural, and political life of Israel was down south in the land of Judah and in the city of Jerusalem. Nazareth is all the way in the north across the land of Samaria. From Nazareth, Jesus moves to a further remote region to Capernaum.

By quoting the prophecy of Isaiah, Matthew shows how the ministry of Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. The fulfillment is quite shocking. Matthew quotes from [Isaiah 9](#) and [Isaiah 42](#) and the context of these passages is the Assyrian invasion and the future restoration characterized by a dawning light.

Zebulun and Naphtali were some of the first regions of northern Israel to be taken by gentile forces. In his day, Isaiah served a very similar function that John the Baptist plays. He is calling out the wicked leadership of Jerusalem and Judah for their sinfulness. In Isaiah's day, he foretells of a future restoration of God's people, and he explains that the dawning light of God's kingdom will arrive in Zebulun and Naphtali. In "Galilee of the Gentiles".

In Isaiah's day, and in Jesus' day, this region was looked down upon. For Isaiah, this was the faithless northern kingdom of Israel who suffered God's judgement centuries before Judah would go into exile. In Jesus' day, this region was likewise scorned. It was technically part of Israel, but it there were many gentiles in the area.

By quoting Isaiah in this way, Matthew is showing that the judgement on God's people, the judgement that John the Baptist said was coming, is seen by where the light of the kingdom begins to dawn. It isn't to the leadership in Jerusalem, it isn't even in Judea. No, it is way up in Zebulun and Naphtali. The kingdom dawns in the "out of the way" places filled with both Jew and gentile.

God has put to shame the wise and powerful by choosing to begin his kingdom with what is foolish and weak ([1 Cor 1:28](#)). In the kingdom of God it is the last who will be first and the first who will be last. It is the least of these who is first in the kingdom of heaven.

- › The application here is to remember where it is that the ministry of Jesus began and to be warned or take heart. If you are in a position of prominence, whether it is in your home, your work, this society, or even here at church, take heed to the "out of the way places" because it is often there that the light of the kingdom dawns.
- › If you are in a position of weakness, take heart. Just as God heard and saw the Hebrews when they were in slavery, God hears and sees you and his kingdom is at hand.

The Call of Jesus' Disciples (vv. 18-22)

The theme of judgement continues when Jesus calls his disciples. But it is important to remember that judgement is never alone in the Bible. And we see this in our passage. While the light of the kingdom dawning in Galilee is a form of judgement against the wicked leadership in Judah and Jerusalem, it is nonetheless the dawning of the kingdom! God is nonetheless showing up. Just as the leadership came out to see John the Baptist, so too can they come up to Galilee and see Jesus!

But this also shows up in the way Jesus calls his first disciples. ***While walking by the Sea of Galille, [Jesus] saw Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother [who] were fishermen. Jesus called them and Immediately they left their nets and followed [Jesus]. Going on from there [Jesus] saw James and John (the sons of Zebedee)...and [Jesus] called them. And Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed [Jesus].***

When Jesus calls these disciples he tells them, “**Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.**” there is once again an allusion to the prophetic writings of the Bible ([Jer 16:16](#) & [Amos 4:2](#)). In the prophetic writings, the “fishers of men” are the gentile powers that will use their hooks to catch the wicked leaders of the land and take them away into exile.

Here though, Jesus is inverting this language. The “fishers of men” are no longer gentile powers like Babylon. No, Jesus is saying that it is his own disciples who will be “fishers of men.” Jesus understands that his own disciples will “capture” men and they will do by both invading the land of Israel and by going to all the gentile nations and spreading the good news.

But of course there is another aspect of this to notice beyond the theme of judgement. Notice that Jesus is calling these disciples to follow him and they immediately leave their vocation and even their family to follow Christ. For most Christians, the call to follow Christ will not entail such a radical restructuring of their lives. There is nothing wrong with being a fisherman or a son of Zebedee.

Rather, what is shown here is the ultimate allegiance all must have to Christ. We are called to order all relationships and vocations under our allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ. When he calls, we must immediately respond in obedience to his commands.

One of the blessing of living in a Christian family, or working in an environment where Christ is honored is that the call to follow Christ creates little to no friction within these existing relationships. That is truly a blessing but it is not always the case. Throughout the history of the church Christians have often had to follow Christ in ways that caused turmoil in families, vocations, and many other blessings and comforts in order to be obedient to the call of Jesus.

- › This is one of the reasons why Christians should pray for the ability to live quiet and peaceable lives ([1 Tim 2:2](#), [1 Thess 4:11](#)). You should pray for your families, your employers, and the civil leaders above you that your allegiance to Christ would not lead to pain and hardship in these areas.
- › However, you should also know that this has been the case for Christians throughout the history of the church. Moreover, you need to be prepared to follow Jesus faithfully in a society that is increasingly opposed to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Set your eyes upon Jesus and know that even for those who

give up many things for the kingdom gain back 30, 50, and 100 fold in the kingdom.

The Spread of Jesus' Fame (vv. 23-25)

The final sign of the judgement that Christ brings is in the spread of Jesus' fame as he ministers in Galilee. Jesus **went throughout Galilee, teaching..., and healing. So his fame spread throughout all Syria...and great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and from Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.**

Very similar to the first point, geography plays a big role in explaining the judgement that is taking place. As already mentioned, Jesus begins his ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee which is a kind of judgement on the center of power in Jerusalem and Judah to the south.

But Jesus' ministry is also being received and exalted in by "all the wrong people". Verse 24 states that **Jesus' fame spread throughout all Syria** and in verse 25 **great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis**. These are either explicitly gentile areas or, in Galilee's case, a region of Israel that is friendly with gentiles. Those who are first experiencing and rejoicing in the arrival of the kingdom of heaven are not in the centers of power but those who are far off and even the gentiles.

Of course verse 25 does make it clear that there were those coming from Jerusalem and Judea to come and follow Jesus and this should not be overlooked. Jesus is forming a new Israel around himself and there are those from the center of power who will follow him throughout his ministry. But in order to do so, they must go up to Galilee to follow Jesus, they must go to the messiah in humility.

But when we see the nature of Jesus' ministry in verses 23-25 it is clear why Jesus proclaims the fact that the "kingdom of **heaven**" is at hand. When the kingdom shows up in the ministry of Jesus, disease and affliction and demonic oppression are driven away. Talk of the kingdom of "heaven" does not entail some other-worldly kingdom that is not interested in **this world**. No, when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven he is speaking of the restoration that was lost when Adam was dispelled from the Garden of Eden.

There in the garden, heaven and earth were united, and now in the kingdom of Jesus, the union between heaven and earth is being restored. This is why Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” This is manifested in Jesus’ ministry by driving back all the effects of the fall. Diseases and afflictions ceased as earth conforms to the pattern of heaven.

As subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven, we are called to live in light of Jesus’ reign over heaven and earth ([Matt. 28:18](#)). And part of the way God’s kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven is by God’s people living in obedience to their king just as he is obeyed perfectly in heaven.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, I call you to respond this Lord’s day to the call of Christ to follow him. Follow him even if he calls you from out of the way places. Follow Christ even if it means leaving behind your nets and your father. Because as you follow Christ into his kingdom there is nothing that you lose that you do not regain in Christ!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.