

## The Gospel of the Kingdom

Matthew 4:12–25<sup>i</sup>

### Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand.

In the days before Jesus was revealed to the people of Israel through His baptism, His cousin, John the Baptist

<sup>1</sup> ...came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** Matthew 3:1–2 ESV

This is a call, in the words of Matthew Henry, to

“Admit a second thought, to correct the errors of the first...[to] Consider your ways, change your minds; you have thought amiss; think again, and think aright.”<sup>ii</sup>

That was John’s message,

<sup>2</sup> **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** Matthew 3:2 ESV

and let me encourage you to remember it, it will be important shortly. But consider also Matthew’s description of the man himself—not the description of his wardrobe and dietary peculiarities as found in verse 4, but the description of the man found in verse 3.

<sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” Matthew 3:1–3 ESV

So, John came in fulfillment of Old Covenant prophecy, with the specific mission to prepare the way of the Lord; to break up the fallow ground in Israel; to make a straight path for the coming of The Promised One. It was for this purpose that he preached repentance, to turn the hearts of the people away from sin and self, and to turn them toward the Messiah, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Of course, we might imagine that repentance wouldn’t be a popular conference theme, but in spite of that, the people came. Verse 5 says:

<sup>5</sup> **Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,** Matthew 3:5 ESV

And in the Gospel according to Mark:

<sup>5</sup> ...**all** the country of Judea and **all** Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, **confessing their sins.** Mark 1:5 ESV

because that’s what repentance is, confessing that we are sinners, then turning away from our sin. That’s what John preached, and that’s why he baptized. He said as much in Matthew 3, verse 11:

<sup>11</sup> **“I baptize you with water for repentance...”**

But even in baptism he highlighted that his ministry was still one of preparing the way.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance...

he said,

...but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>Matthew 3:11</sup> ESV

To understand this completely, we have to consider those to whom this particular word was addressed. According to verse 7, among the many common people who were coming out to be baptized by John there were also Pharisees and Sadducees, and to them, he said,

<sup>7</sup> ...“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>Matthew 3:7</sup> ESV

And again, this is not exactly the way we imagine the gospel being proclaimed. We want a more winsome message, more positive, but in the words of the old Puritan:

If the heart of man had continued upright and unstained, divine consolations might have been received without this painful operation preceding; but, being sinful, it must be first pained before it can be laid at ease, must labour before it can be at rest. The sore must be searched, or it cannot be cured. <sup>iii</sup>

Even so, John’s message was consistent. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees to the same repentance as everyone else. More still, he went on to instruct them in verse 8:

<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>Matthew 3:8</sup> ESV

Which gives us a glimpse into the nature of the thing. It tells us that repentance is not merely a turning away, but also a turning toward. We are not merely saved from, we are saved to. And repentance is not a one time experience, like walking the aisle at a crusade. Repentance is an attitude of the heart, created in us by the Holy Spirit, which causes us to turn from sin whenever it appears, and to turn toward the righteousness of God. As Calvin wrote:

...repentance is an inward renewal of the man, which manifests itself in the outward life, as a tree produces its fruit. <sup>iv</sup>

This was the message of John the Baptist when he went into the wilderness of Judea preaching,

<sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” <sup>Matthew 3:2</sup> ESV

### **A Light Has Dawned.**

Then, of course, came the revelation of Jesus of Jesus to Israel through His baptism,<sup>v</sup> and then the temptation, in which Satan offered Jesus everything that he had offered to Adam and Eve in the Garden. But after the baptism and temptation, Matthew 4, verse 17 tells us that when Jesus

<sup>12</sup> ...heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. <sup>13</sup> And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup> “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup> the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” Matthew 4:12–16 ESV

And what was that light? Well, Christ Himself, of course. John the Apostle wrote of Him,

<sup>4</sup> In him was life, and the life was the light of men. John 1:4 ESV

But Jesus didn’t just wander about Galilee and Judea glowing like Moses emerging from the tent of meeting, or like the bush that burned but was not consumed, the next verse, Matthew 4, verse 17, tells us very specifically how the light of Christ came to shine in the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali.

<sup>17</sup> From that time...

we are told,

...Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Matthew 4:17 ESV

So, the very same message that was proclaimed by John the Baptist (that’s why I encouraged you earlier to remember what John said), and Jesus preached it in the very same words. Furthermore, we’re told in verse 23 that

<sup>23</sup> ...he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and **proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom** and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. Matthew 4:23 ESV

So, this message, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” is also described here as “the gospel of the kingdom,”

### **The Gospel of the Kingdom.**

So, the question arises, what was—what is—this “gospel of the kingdom”? Is it in some way different than “the Gospel” as we commonly use that term? Well, it’s a legitimate question if, as we noted last Sunday (and, as some have claimed<sup>vi</sup>), “**the Gospel**” is nothing more than what we read in First Corinthians 15:

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures... 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 ESV

If this were the whole of the gospel—and never mind that the very next word in First Corinthians 15, is “and”, which might indicate that it is not—then what was the Gospel being preached by both Jesus and John the Baptist? If the whole of the Gospel is “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures”, then what was the gospel before Christ died for our sins, and all that followed that fact?

One possibility is that the content of the gospel has changed, but to get this out of the way quickly, No! Absolutely not! May it never be! Lord's Day 6 of The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the Scriptures when it makes clear that our Lord Jesus Christ, was given us to set us completely free and to make us right with God, and then goes on to note:

God himself began to reveal **the gospel** already in Paradise; later, he proclaimed it by the holy patriarchs and prophets, and portrayed it by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law; [and] finally, he fulfilled it through his own dear Son.<sup>vii</sup>

The gospel has not changed. It has been the same since it was first proclaimed in Genesis 3. So, a better answer is that the Gospel was never meant to be reduced. A better answer would be that the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and John was not inferior to the gospel proclaimed by Paul, but was one and the same. A better answer would be to look at the whole of the Word of God—also known as, “the Gospel”—and find there some indication of what Jesus was actually saying when He

<sup>17</sup> ...began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Matthew 4:17 ESV

(the very same message proclaimed by the baptist, and in the very same words), and also when

<sup>23</sup> ...he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom... Matthew 4:23 ESV

Now of course, Matthew was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so we know that his use of the term “Gospel” in this context was exactly right. There can be no accidents here. As we’ve seen in the book of Romans, even when Paul appears to get sidetracked, it’s because the Spirit is leading and it’s always for a very good purpose. So, let’s just follow the narrative thread that we find here in Matthew, chapters 4 and 5 and see where it leads. First, in Matthew 4, verse 23, Jesus,

<sup>23</sup> ...went throughout all Galilee, **teaching** in their synagogues and **proclaiming** the gospel of the kingdom and **healing** every disease and every affliction among the people. Matthew 4:23 ESV

Then, as one might imagine:

<sup>24</sup> ...his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup> **And great crowds followed him** from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. Matthew 4:24–25 ESV

As Jesus taught then, and proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom, and healed, great crowds gathered and followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis (a gentile territory), in the north, to Jerusalem and Judea in the south, and even from eastward, beyond the Jordan. As Hendriksen notes, “Even Perea,” another gentile region,

...east of the Jordan and, mostly, south of Decapolis sent its representatives. The multitudes must have been immense!<sup>viii</sup>

But, watch how this all connects together. In the last verse of Matthew chapter 4, “Great crowds followed Him,” and then in chapter 5, verse 1, Matthew wrote:

<sup>1</sup> **Seeing the crowds**, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them... Matthew 5:1–2 ESV

Again, in the words of Hendriksen,

...it is characteristic of Matthew to introduce a subject and then to expand upon it. The river broadens into a lake. So also here, Christ’s preaching and his healing have been introduced...So now a sample of this teaching is given in [the Sermon on the Mount].<sup>ix</sup>

And there’s no reason to limit the teaching that follows to the 12 in this instance. They were mentioned back in chapter four, but the idea that connects one paragraph here—one verse—to the next is, “the crowds,” or “the great crowds” that followed Him—these other disciples—who were so interested in what He had to say. It was to this group, which obviously included the 12, that Jesus was preaching in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7.

More importantly still, we have to understand that what follows, this great sermon by the Master Himself is not some inferior “kingdom ethic” that applies only tangentially to Jesus’ followers in the New Covenant era. Nor is this teaching for the Kingdom era at the end of the world, as some dispensational authors have implied. When Jesus opened His mouth and began to teach, what He taught—what He proclaimed—was “the gospel of the kingdom,” and through the gospel, then, now, and always, God

<sup>30</sup> ...commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” Acts 17:30–31 ESV

That Man is our Savior, Jesus Christ, and the words that we will consider together in the Sermon on the Mount are His words, “attested to us by those who heard”.<sup>x</sup> This is the Gospel of the Kingdom, and the Kingdom, as one commentator has written, indicates nothing less than

*God’s kingship, rule, or sovereignty, recognized in the hearts and operative in the lives of His people, and effecting their complete salvation, their constitution as a church, and finally a redeemed universe.*<sup>xi</sup>

Even so, may God give us ears to hear as we walk through this great sermon by the Lord Jesus Himself, and may we stand ready, as James wrote, to be doers of the word, and not hearers only, for

<sup>25</sup> ...the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. James 1:25 ESV

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
- ii Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1618.
- iii Henry, *Commentary*, 1618.
- iv John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke, vol. 1* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 190.
- v Cf. John 1:31.
- vi Cf. John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 100. MacArthur negatively cites the work of classic dispensationalists who taught, for example, "...that the gospel Jesus preached had nothing to do with salvation but was simply an announcement that the time had come to set up the kingdom of Christ on earth."
- vii Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 19", *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 18.
- viii William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973) 252.
- ix Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, 259.
- x Cf. Hebrews 2:3.
- xi Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, 249.