



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Various

“The Messiah’s Year of Public Favor, Part I”

TRANSCRIPT

The theme of our series of studies is the New Testament revelation of the Messiah. And we’ve been looking at the leading events in our Lord’s life and are now considering a few studies that have to do with the ministry that the Lord Jesus engaged in.

In our last study we mentioned that our Lord’s ministry may be divided into three periods. They have been called the Year of Obscurity, the Year of Public Favor, and the Year of Opposition and it is to the second of the periods that we come in this study, for in our last study we looked the Year of Obscurity. The geographical area in which our Lord ministered during the second period was a very limited one. Of course, the entire land of Palestine, by our standards, was a very limited area being about one hundred and fifty miles long from the North to the South and about an average of fifty miles wide from the West to the East. Galilee was the most northerly of the four provinces of the land and it was about sixty miles long by about thirty miles broad. Near the eastern boundary it suddenly dropped down into a large gulf through which the River Jordan flowed. In the midst of it, five hundred feet below the Mediterranean Sea was the lovely Sea of Galilee. The rabbis used to say that while God created all the seas, the Sea of Galilee was his chosen sea. It is a beautiful body of water, oval in shape like a harp, thirteen miles long

and seven miles wide, surrounded by brown mountains rising as high as two thousand feet on the eastern shore.

Some have said the scene makes one think of a sapphire stone set in gold. And away to the north towers, the always snowcapped peak of Mount Hermon. The sea in its environs played a large part in our Lord’s ministry. Many of the other places in the land where he labored are either today unknown or have significantly changed. Many are offensively and gaudily adorned. When in the land, many believers find it difficult to even enter some of the shrines for they reek of pious and pretentious unreality. But the Sea of Galilee rolls on just about as it did in our Lord’s time. Fishermen still sail there boats and ply their trade there. The same mountains look down upon it and the same storms still burst over it and convulse its bosom.

Take away from the New Testament the incidents in our Lord’s life associated with the Sea of Galilee and a significant section of the gospels would be gone. Here by its shores lay Capernaum, our Lord’s home for months during his ministry; Bethsaida, Chorazin, and other places. Here he called his disciples, he performed his miracles, he preached some of his greatest sermons, stilled the storm, walked upon the waves, and appeared to his disciples after his resurrection.

The second year of our Lord’s public ministry, the Year of Public Favor, was spent largely in Capernaum although it began in Cana and Nazareth. After the experience in the synagogue in Nazareth, to which we will turn in a moment, he made his home in Capernaum on the northwestern shore of the sea. From there he labored in his teaching and miracle or sign ministry and gathered and trained his apostles.

Let’s look for a moment now at the characteristics of the Messiah’s teaching and first its style. We begin our study of the Year of Public Favor with his teaching ministry for that is the way his public ministry began. All three of the synoptic gospels mention the beginning in Galilee: Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke chapter 4, verse 14 and verse 15. Mark’s gospel relates the beginning in these words, “And after John had been taken into

custody, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God and saying, The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the gospel,; Mark 1:14 and 15. The dateline for the inception of his ministry is John’s imprisonment. That was the signal for the herald to be replaced by the King. Men may stifle the profits and the apostles, but they cannot derail the word of God. John may be imprisoned but God’s word still runs its course. God in Christ is now breaking into time in a deeper way for man’s salvation.

The Kingdom of God is, of course, the messianic kingdom promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. There is no need for Jesus to define it, we are to understand kingdom by the usage of the term in the Old Testament. The responsibility of Israel is to believe the good news. Usually belief is associated with a person, our savior. However, here it’s associated with a creed, the good news. There is no contradiction, for a creed of some kind lies at the basis of confidence in the person of Christ. We do not believe in Christ without knowledge of the truth regarding his divine personality and his sufficient atonement for us by his cross. Those who cry, “Not creeds, but Christ!” are simply in fundamental error concerning the gospel. In Luke’s gospel, after opening words of a general nature, our Lord’s ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth is described by Luke, Luke 4:16 through 30.

It’s clear that Luke regards this as the significant beginning of the public ministry in Galilee. The events in Jerusalem in the early preaching of the synagogues may have stirred and brightened the interest of his fellow townsmen. But when Jesus stood up to read the word of God in the meeting, a hush fell upon the audience. Taking the scroll of Isaiah from the attendant he read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord,” Luke 4:18 and 19.

There are three things to note, first with a mind clearly saturated with Scripture and remembering the anointing with the Spirit at the baptism, he applied Isaiah’s great prophecy to himself. Second, since Isaiah’s prophecy has to do with the Messiah and his ministry, it’s clear that Jesus is claiming to be that Messiah. When he says, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ear,” verse 21, he puts his finger on the word of God from the great prophet and says, “That passage is mine. And third, it’s also quite clear that Jesus saw no fog or mist lying over his future. He was conscious of what lay before him and further, his great theme was himself. We say with Paul when we preach, we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord. But he preached himself. In fact, McLaren says, “He’s truly characteristic and unparalleled teaching is about himself.” His demand is not, “Believe this or that which I tell,” but, “Believe in me.” And there in the synagogue among old men who had seen him in his cradle, and young ones who had played with him in the streets, and neighbors who had known him as the maker of their rustic carpentry, he begins his ministry by claiming that the great prophecy as fulfilled in him. If this is not the speech of incarnate divinity, it’s the boasting of arrogant egotism. And while it may be said that others have preached themselves, such as Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy, Joseph Smith, and Joseph Russell, Jesus Christ has convinced multitudes through the centuries to believe him.

The results of his ministry in Nazareth mirror the total response of the nation Israel and of other nations through the ages. Some responded with words of praise for what he said, but soon they were at his throat and only a supernaturalist saved him, verse 22 through verse 30, of Luke chapter 4, “Familiarity with him blinded them to his beauty and to their need.” What he had said was proven by their actions. Truly, I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. Other aspects of his style may be briefly mentioned. He spoke with authority and not as the scribes.

That’s a marvelous passage in Matthew chapter 7 describing how he spoke in the sermon on the mount, listen to these words, the result was that when Jesus had finished

these words the multitudes were amused at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as the scribes. No boring citing of rabbinic authorities. No wonder they said of him, “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks.” The scribes were exponents of the deadest and driest system of theology that is ever passed in any age for religion. Instead of expounding the Scriptures, they retell the opinions of the commentators. And instead of dwelling on the great themes of the word of God, they tortured the sacred text into a ceremonial manual and preached on the proper breadth of phylacteries, the proper postures for prayer, the proper length for fasts and related incidentals.

Jesus’ teaching was characterized by wisdom and even the scribes and Pharisees addressed him as teacher although he had not gone to their schools. Simplicity but not triviality, pervaded his teaching also. Today we have such shallowness and triviality that in our preaching and teaching that in fact men in 1987 seem to be reaching near depths in shallowness in the preaching of the New Testament and the Old Testament. Some have said of our Lord’s words in John’s gospel that they are simple enough for a child to wade in them and deep enough for an elephant to swim in them. Freshness rather than originality, for his teaching was essentially that of the Scriptures, characterized his words. He stated the golden rule found in Tobias in the negative form, “And what thou thyself hatest do to no man.” In the far more beautiful and meaningful, positive form, “Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you ye even so to them, for this is the law and the prophets,” Matthew 7:12. Other attributes such as boldness and power also belonged to his teaching. There is no more attracting power than eloquence of word and Jesus possessed that as no other man.

And now let’s think for a few moments about the method of his teaching. His method in teaching included a large use of parables; concise, memorable, expressive uses of common things, customs and experiences of life. The prodigal Son, the soar, the good Samaritan, the wedding banquet and the ten virgins forever remain in the minds of those

who read them. They were simple pictures designed to get men and women to see the truth he proclaimed. It’s not wonder that Nicodemus called him, “A teacher come from God.” Simple, but profound were his pictures.

Jesus, however, also made great declarations of truth concerning the Father, concerning the Spirit, and concerning himself. While not the first to speak of God as Father, he gave it new depth of meaning. Israel was called God’s son, but no one in the Old Testament ever called God his own Father individually. It was something utterly new when Jesus in the model prayer said that the disciples should address God as our Father who art in heaven. That was new and fresh and the apostles never forgot his use of the term in prayer. And they later themselves speak of God as, “Abba pater,” or, “Abba father.”

To the unexpressed question, “What is God like?” Jesus’ answer by his life was, “A Father.” He also made great declarations concerning the Spirit of God speaking of him as the great communicator of truth. He would guide men in all the truth, John 15:26 and 16:13. And his declarations of himself are too numerous to detail. In the Galilean ministry he uttered one of the greatest when he said, “Just as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many,” Matthew 20 and verse 28. That text teaches atonement by penal substitutionary sacrifice and that’s the foundation of all of our salvation.

And what Jesus taught he lived. Professor Stewart has eloquently set it forth. “What Emerson says of Seneca, Stewart has written, “Might well be applied to the scribes. His thoughts are excellent, if only he had the right to utter them.” For they were talking of things they had never experienced but into that there bursts this new voice out of Galilee. It was said by them of all time, but I say unto you, with one stroke sweeping scribism in all its buttressed positions aside, striking down through all the layers of tradition to bedrock fact, to the living God. And men were left gasping at the sheer daring of hit, amazed and overwhelmed by the marvelous assurance of it. But also feeling

with a great thrill of the heart that here was the real thing at last. Here was a man who had seen what he was talking about and knew it and had a right to speak. A man straight from God. He taught men that God was his Father and he lived the fact. In the storm and tempest on the lake that terrified hardened fishermen, acquainted with its perils, he slept in the stern of the little skiff, asleep in the midst of the storm, a storm that terrified Peter and John and others who were used to that lake and its storms. Why? Simply because God was his Father, the sea was his Father’s sea, the storm had come from his Father’s hand. And as Stewart reminds us, “Underneath were the everlasting arms.” That’s truth by which to live today, isn’t it?

Now I want to speak to you about the content of the Messiah’s teaching, and first about the kingdom and the Messiah. It’s popular for men to say that Jesus had no use for doctrine. We alluded to this a few moments ago. “He did not make use of any system of doctrine,” James Stalker said. That’s true in one sense, namely that he did not use the terms that have become popular in the study of systematic theology such as predestination, the trinity, and effectual calling and similar terms. However, there is no biblical writer who had stronger views on these doctrines. A careful reading of only one gospel, the Gospel of John, will make that absolutely clear. If you have any question about the Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching of the doctrine of sovereign unconditional election, read John chapter 6 and some of the things that he says there, “All that the Father gives me shall come to me, and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets and they shall all be taught of God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.” And verse 65, “And he was saying, For this reason I have said to you that no one can come to me unless it has been granted him from the Father.”

In fact, when speaking about doctrine, to be ignorant and unconcerned with doctrine is to be ignorant and unconcerned over Christianity. As Luther told Erasmus in

their debate over freewill because Erasmus said he didn’t like Luther making those assertions. “To say that we have no pleasure in assertions,” Luther said, “Is all one with saying we are not Christians. Take away all assertions of biblical truth and one takes away Christianity.” Jesus made great assertions. To be brief, he laid great stress on three things. First he emphasized the doctrine of the Kingdom of God and the messianic ruler who would sit on the Davidic throne. That was the theme with which his ministry began. “Repent, for the kingdom of the heaven is at hand,” Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15. And this is the theme that is predominant until the end. His final great confession being that he is the Messiah who shall come in glory to reign over the earth. When Caiaphas the high priest, asked him, “Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” Jesus boldly replied, “I am and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven,” Mark 14:61 and 62. That was the soul and center of his eschatological teaching.

He also spoke of the death he would die on the cross. The text cited earlier says it beautifully, “Just as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” As R. W. Dale said, “Jesus came not so much to preach the gospel as that there might be a gospel to preach.” And Jesus made many memorable statements regarding man’s sin such as, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” Luke 11:13.

The citation with which Jesus began his Galilean ministry in Nazareth touches directly upon man’s sin and need. It speaks in his quotation from the Book of Isaiah of the fact that when the Messiah came he would give release to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the downtrodden. These words express our Lord’s concern for sin for these are the things he came to eliminate. In fact, he proved his implacable antagonism to sin by dying for it. The cross suffering is the measure of the seriousness of sin.

And now a few words about the purpose of the Messiah’s teaching and then a conclusion. Did he come to save, is that what he taught? Well we know he came to save. There have been some students who have said that Jesus taught in order to save and that he did save by his teaching. One might cite the text, “The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life,” John 6:63, a support of this contention.

The claim, however, is hardly true. He himself has testified that his life without an atoning cross would be unable to save. Listen to his words, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it brings much fruit.” So Jesus didn’t teach to save, but he came to save. In other words, men are not saved by his teaching, they are saved by his death. About which, of course, he taught. The statement one must admit, John 12:24, about the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying is a figurative one but the sense is plain, he must die.

The second of the famous three musts of John 3 -- John 3:7, 14, and 30 -- so beloved by textual preachers, emphasizes the necessity of his death also. In it Jesus says after saying, “You must be born again,” and then later on saying, giving the words of John, “I must decrease, he must increase.” Jesus says in verses 14 and 15, of John 3, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up. That whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

So Jesus did not teach to save, but he did perform the work by which we are saved. In other words, more than simply his teaching was necessary for men to be saved, he must die for sins. His teaching obviously was to fit for life. One purpose of his teaching and that purpose is quite clear. It was to fit the saints of God for life. That is, to bring them to life through the knowledge of his saving death, and second, to instruct them in life by the word of God. To ignore the words of the Lord Jesus in his teaching ministry is to bring on personal ruin. For these very words are to judge men at the last day. The Lord Jesus the Messiah speaks the terrifying words himself, “He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has one who judges him. The word I spoke is what will

judge him at the last day.” Oh, my friend, how important it is that you hear the word of our Lord.

A word of conclusion: as we have seen in the first Galilean preaching in Nazareth’s synagogue, the Messiah’s teaching divided the hearers into two classes; some were repelled, others were touched but only for a time. It’s terribly saddening to see how few there were, even when hearing his preaching, who responded in faith. Some did respond, however, and came to know themselves forgiven at infinite cost. That work of God became a moral dynamic of great force, transforming lives and bondage, producing God’s love and human hearts and good works in the world, returning honor to the throne of God. It made and it makes the forgiven saint Christ’s man, body, soul, and spirit forever. If you’ve heard me this morning and you do not know him who came that men might be saved, who taught that his death was necessary for our salvation, come to Christ. Listen to his words which tell you how far you are from God, how much you need his saving death, that you’re a captive and in bondage to sin and need deliverance. And he’s provided the sacrifice by which men may be saved. Come to Christ, believe in him, and trust in him.

In our next study we’ll continue to look at our Lord’s personal ministry...

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