

Basic Training: God Comes To Us
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 25:25; Ephesians 4:21-5:2; Matthew 4:23-25

Friends, our final reading this evening comes from Matthew 4:23-25. Let's listen to the Word of God together. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. 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. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him."

Have you ever thought about how much there is to do? We all have to-do lists, things that we have to get done like grocery shopping or laundry. But there are tons of fun things to do too. There are so many movies and TV programs, books, games, sporting events, plays...you couldn't possibly participate in them all if you wanted to. There are a countless list of things we could do, should do, must do, and might do. We see "100 great novel" lists and "100 great movie" lists and there's 95 we haven't experienced. We get paralyzed by our options!

But in the midst of all the things to do, we forget what it is to have something done for us. We pay people to do things for us, like a waiter at a restaurant. We might come to Meal and a Movie Night and enjoy someone else's cooking, but we bring a dish too. It is rare something is done for us without thought of payback or reward. We almost don't know what to do with that kind of kindness. We rarely accept it.

We've heard about "paying it forward" – the idea that we'll do something good for someone else knowing that something good will later happen to us. If we do it right, it's based in Jesus' teaching, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But paying it forward often winds up making more for us to do and no one receiving a genuine gift.

A few months ago, patrons at a Starbucks started paying it forward – the first person in line bought the next person's cup of coffee. Well, everyone kept paying it forward for several hours. There was a huge furor when somebody finally refused to pay for the next person's coffee. The one person who actually received the gift was shamed! What a fiasco!

When we get a gift, we are obligated to give back. We often look at our relationship with God as something with lots of obligations attached to it, too. It's easy for me to look at a passage and see what Jesus is doing and to pull out of it things we should be doing as Jesus' followers. That's not wrong; we want to become more like Jesus. But being a disciple meant hanging out with Jesus, spending time with him. Jesus took the hospitality of anyone who would show it to him, even notorious people. He taught a lot, but his teachings can be read in less than eight hours. Today's passage isn't about what He taught. It's about how He came to us, spent time with us, and gave gifts to us.

So this week, there's not a huge outline. You don't have to fill in anything on the insert, though you can take notes if you like. Today is going to be a little different. We're going to spend time with Jesus as we find Him in this passage. We're going to think about what it would have been like to meet Him as He roamed around Galilee. And we're going to see what it meant to be a follower of Jesus in the literal sense, and why people did it. I think it will apply to our own lives just as much as adding to our to-do list.

So first, let's think about where we are, Galilee, a large region populated by Jews and some Gentiles. We're forty, fifty, sixty miles from Judea, the home of Jerusalem and the center of Jewish life. Galileans were looked down upon by the religious establishment. They lived too far away from the temple to worship and bring sacrifices on a regular basis, so they were seen as second class. But that's where Jesus goes, and He goes everywhere.

His message isn't first to the elite, but to everyday people. Jesus didn't hole himself up in an office or limit his ministry to those who could pay Him or help Him in any way. You could have easily met Him if you lived in the region. In Jesus, God came to us, not to just be human, but to be with us, among us. Can you imagine sitting down by Jesus at Meal and a Movie Night or going Christmas caroling with Him? Can you imagine serving a meal beside Him or holding his hand in a prayer meeting? Because that's how close He was. He was real, human, nearby.

You would have likely met Him at the local church. The synagogue was the center of religious life in every village. That was where people gathered like we do. The synagogue was where you heard the Scripture and learned about God on a regular basis. There may have been songs. They were definitely prayers. The synagogue wasn't all that dissimilar than what we do today in church. Every community with ten or more men who could read and study Scripture had a synagogue. In a huge city like Jerusalem, there were over 400 synagogues.

Imagine that one week Jesus spoke down at St. Isadore's down the road, the next week He came and spoke here; the third week He was at Immanuel Lutheran. That was His pattern, to go from synagogue to synagogue. They had three services a week. He might have shown up any time. Who knows? It makes us ask ourselves – does Jesus still do that? He sent the Holy Spirit to us so that He could be with us. He told the disciples, “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Do we think about Jesus being genuinely present in our worship tonight, at our fellowship, in our service? How amazing it would have been to meet Him; how amazing is it to think that He's with us here and now, not limited to one place, but with all Christians who gather in His name!

He went to the synagogues to teach, but what was it He said? We know He taught repentance; Matthew covered that. But here Matthew says that it's the “good news” of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes we hear the word “gospel” and we forget what it means. The word “gospel” means “good news.” Jesus is Himself the good news, and He brought the good news that the Kingdom of God had not only come to earth but was now making strides as it had never done before.

This good news is big. It's news that God loves us and wants to draw near to us. It's news that if we turn from our sins and believe God, we can have eternal life. We've lived with the idea of eternal life in our heads as long as we can imagine, but not the ancient Jews. There was a thin thread of hope of resurrection, but even the religious leaders were split on it. The old-school leaders, the Sadducees, didn't believe there was anything after this life at all. All your rewards came now. The Pharisees believed in resurrection as a promise they saw in the Old Testament. No one was sure who was right. Jesus taught that not only was eternal life real, it was available to everyone who truly followed God. Resurrection would be coming to those who trusted in Him and not in themselves, who would reject their old way of life for the new way He would show them.

There was skepticism. Imagine if someone came preaching something we'd never heard before – we'd throw him out. Jesus' words made sense of the Scriptures, but there was a lot of doubt. For over a century, false messiahs promised victory over Rome. They were quickly defeated and crucified by the Romans, and their followers scattered. Was this just one more asking people to follow him to their deaths? Unlike the charlatans, Jesus came with a message of peace, that God's Kingdom wasn't coming with weapons but rejection of sin and following after God's heart. But where was the proof? How can we know that He's not like the rest of them?

That's where Jesus' miraculous healing comes in. Jesus heals people all over Galilee. It makes Him a phenomenon. People are curious about His teaching, but they're amazed by a show. (That's true today, isn't it?) Jesus' healings showed that God was kind and merciful and compassionate, and they gave evidence that His claims were true that He was ushering in the Kingdom of God in their midst.

Again, let's imagine the era. If we're in the average Jewish family, someone in our extended family right now is ill, sick, lame, or injured. We or a close family member has lost a child to disease before they reached adulthood. Even the best doctors can do little about it. There's no understanding of how sickness spreads, so caretakers get the disease themselves. Broken bones don't mend right; simple injuries can destroy your life's work and leave you without food. People would travel for miles for the hope of cures, almost invariably to be disappointed. Most of us in this room today would not be alive or would be severely disabled and begging.

Then Jesus comes, and He's not working magic, and He doesn't say, "Take two pills for seven days and we'll see how this works." Jesus touches them and they are miraculously healed. The only time there is a wait between the touch of Jesus and the actual healing is when Jesus is making a point. This isn't a shell game, either. Many people argued where Jesus got His power from. The Pharisees argued the power was demonic because they hated Him; others claimed it was from God. But even Jesus' most vicious accusers couldn't deny the healings themselves.

What gets lost in translation is that Jesus heals everything brought before Him. The two words for “disease” and “sickness” are different; one’s for common ailments, while the other’s for deadly diseases. Perhaps more importantly, Matthew lists three different kinds of illness Jesus cures: demon possession, lunacy or epilepsy, and paralysis. There’s a three-fold cure; Jesus heals not only physical sickness but mental illness and spiritual sickness.

Some folks argue that demon possession wasn’t real, that it was primitive people talking about mental illnesses they didn’t understand. The three-fold division shows that people of Jesus’ era knew the differences between mental illness and spiritual oppression. Possession was not something the Old Testament spoke much about. An evil spirit tormented King Saul. Otherwise, it’s exceedingly rare. Why now does it show up?

For one, Jesus has come into the world. The spiritual world is in high alert. Jesus is disarming the powers of darkness and making the way for all the faithful to enter God’s Kingdom for all time. It is no wonder that the enemies of God are in an uproar and make themselves known at this point in time more than any other in history. Just as important is that the cultures around Israel in this era were pagan, and they saw possession as a good thing. They thought some spirits were benevolent and helpful. Some folks made their living by invoking spirits to tell fortunes and influence events. (In the book of Acts, the apostles cast a demon out of a slave girl who made a lot of money for her master telling fortunes!) The influence of these practices means that it was more common. But Jesus heals it all. No matter if it’s life-threatening or just rehabilitating, whether it’s physical, mental, or spiritual, Jesus brings relief. There is power in his word and in His touch.

It makes us ask: how often do I bring my needs before God? My illnesses? My struggles and the struggles of my family and friends? There are times I wish we would pray for more than just healing; sometimes that’s all we pray for rather than the whole of our lives, our church and community and what all is going on. But prayer starts by knowing we can go to God about our everyday lives. We trust He will take care of our church because He takes care of our bodies and minds and souls. We trust in His power to change the nations because He changes us.

Perhaps our problem is that we think our ailments are too petty. But Jesus healed them all, from the greatest to the least. It’s not a bother or a burden for God to hear them and take care of them. Do we not bring those little problems before God because we think we can handle them on our own, or our doctors can? Or is it that if little things go unhealed, we won’t trust that God can do greater things? Sometimes God doesn’t heal us right away because He wants us to learn from our afflictions. But much of the time, He sends relief if we trust Him. Friends, you are in the care of the master healer. Nothing is too big for His touch or too small for His attention.

Moving on...Jesus’ preaching and teaching draw the interested, and then the healings bring the masses. People from everywhere start showing up – Syria, the Ten Cities. Word is spreading all over the place! Folks from Judea, the “holy” part of the holy land, start arriving. Folks hear the news and start showing up in droves. Jews and Gentiles alike are astonished by Jesus. There has never been anything like what He is doing.

Jesus begins to have a large group of followers. Some need healing or are there with a loved one who does. Many are there for the spectacle – none of us even today have seen anything like when Jesus took the broken and make them whole. It was better than even the legendary amusements of Rome. Did they believe in Him? Maybe, maybe not, but they were going to enjoy the ride. Still others were genuinely drawn to Jesus. They followed Him because they recognized in Him the holiness and peace and joy and love that were missing from their lives. They heard His words and believed them. They had to hear more. They had to learn more. They had to get closer to this man who brought with Him the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven that they so longed for.

And Jesus didn't tell anyone to stay away. Not everyone could follow Him everywhere. Jesus even sent some home to glorify God by telling their friends and neighbors what they had witnessed. But Jesus never shunned anyone because of the kind of person they were. Rich and poor alike could meet Him; those who followed the Law diligently and the worst of sinners were welcome to sit at His feet and be challenged by His message to turn themselves fully over to God. Jesus came to His own people, to the Jews, but He didn't turn away foreigners or Samaritans, both hated by the Hebrews as unclean pagans. Who you were didn't matter. What mattered was whether or not you would come and listen, if you would let yourself be touched by His love and grace, if you would let yourself be healed. Jesus came to them, God in our flesh and bone. He went among them. For most, it wasn't even a trip across town. It was just walking to church and saying "yes" to the man from Nazareth.

Friends, there is much we can do on behalf of God's Kingdom, but there's nothing to do until we have spent time at His feet and enjoyed His presence. There's nothing to do until we have experienced the healing ourselves and been renewed. There's nothing to do until God's miracle occurs and we have found ourselves safe and warm and loved in the gift of eternal life, provided by Jesus at the cost of His own life. All we do is based on what He has already done.

In the midst of busy days and nights where the clock keeps ticking, don't be afraid to sit and rest. In those quiet moments, pray. Turn open the Scripture to hear from your God and Savior. Enjoy Him. He draws near even now. Find your strength and safety in Him. Then what is truly important will become clear, and all the "to-dos" will be a joy as we do them as grateful friends of Jesus the healer, teacher, and savior of our souls.