**Follow the King to the Cross**

**The Message of Jesus**

**Matthew 4:12-17**

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In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins his public ministry preaching the gospel (Mk 1:14) which describes John the Baptist’s message and the message Jesus gave his disciples to preach (10:5-7). The gospel is literally the good news about God, God’s kingdom is at hand so repent and believe the gospel. Jesus is Christ, the King (Mt 2:1-6), the Old Testament promised who will deliver Israel from a far deeper problem than a political oppressor, human sin as the angel promised Joseph (Mat 1:21).

After John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus goes to Galilee to live by the Sea of Capernaum, the territory of the tribes of Zebulum and Naphtali (4:12-13).[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead of starting his ministry in Jerusalem, at the center of Jewish life and religious activity, Jesus establishes his home base in Capernaum and spends most of his time ministering in and around Galilee. While some commentators see this as Jesus withdrawing to a more remote location, distancing himself from John the Baptist, the Old Testament quote from Isaiah points us in another direction. Matthew tells us that Jesus relocated to this area so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled (Mat 4:14). When Assyria invaded and conquered Israel (733 BC), these two northern most tribes, Zebulum and Naphtali, were the first to be conquered. This region had a main international trade route which brought the nations to the shores of the sea of Galilee. But this also brought religious influence to the Jews living there which led to familiar Old Testaments themes in the life of Israel, idolatry and apostacy. Theses tribes followed the nations rather than God but now He is calling Israel back to himself. The region which failed to be faithful to the covenant and so were the first to go into exile are now the first to see the dawn, Jesus Christ who is the light of the world (Jn 8:12). But Matthew sees something more, the nation has the opportunity to fulfill its calling as a blessing to the nations, promised in the Abrahamic Covenant.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is called Galilee of the Gentiles because it is estimated that the population was upwards of 50% Gentiles. By ministering in and around Galilee, Jesus and his message were accessible to the nations surrounding Galilee. So rather than Galilee a place to withdraw to distance himself from John the Baptist’s ministry, Jesus made a strategic move to a more diverse region with a wider and more accepting audience with access to the nations. Matthew wants us to see that at the beginning, Jesus’ ministry will extend far beyond Israel, to the nations (Mat 28:19).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is described as people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and those dwelling in the shadow of death, on them a light has dawned (4:16). Dwelling in darkness describes the Jews outside of Jerusalem, unfaithful to God, under Roman rule and living among the Gentiles. Jesus is the light that is dawning on Israel bringing deliverance (Isa 9:4).[[4]](#footnote-4) Here where the darkness is most dense and far removed from the center of Jewish life, they are the first to see the light of Jesus Christ and hear the message that he has come to save them from their sin. Jesus comes to those who least expect it and to those who we least expect.

Jesus’ message, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (4:17). The call to repent is because the people are dwelling in darkness, their lives are off course, they are unfaithful to God. Jesus is calling Israel back to God in preparation for the arrival of the kingdom. Repent means a change of mind that leads to a change of life. Israel was very religious, yet they had spiritually abandoned God so Jesus is calling them to come back to God. Marks gospel describes Jesus preaching as repent and believe the gospel (1:15). That is, turn away from your unfaithfulness and turn back to trusting in God. Repentance is not something you or I conjure up, it is work of God in the human heart (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25). An old Puritan, Thomas Watson defines “repentance as a grace of God’s Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed.” It is a work of grace and so is a work of God. Wayne Grudem says “repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ.”[[5]](#footnote-5) True repentance is a change in how we see our own actions as sinful; it is a sorrow toward and a dislike of our own sin; and it is a choosing to turn away from that sin and walk in obedience to God. Jesus is not calling them to repent of specific sins but turning their whole lives back to God. This is seen in John the Baptists statements to the religious leaders who come to see John’s ministry (3:7-9). Most Jews would not recognize any need for themselves to be baptized because baptism was normally for those converting to Judaism. But apparently John sees them as spiritual Gentiles and needing to flee from the wrath to come. This would be a shock to the religious leaders. Judgement was reserved for Gentiles and only the most wicked in Israel but John challenges that thinking (3:10, 12) just as the Old Testament prophets did in their own day (Amos 32:2-5, etc).[[6]](#footnote-6) John sees them as no better off than the Gentiles. True repentance brings concrete evidence of change, a life of obedience (ie 7:21-23) and not just religious participation (see Mt 15:8). The evidence of believing the gospel is gospel fruit, a transformed life.

The reason he calls them to repent is that the kingdom is at hand. God’s kingdom is God’s rule being established over people’s hearts and lives, over evil, and ultimately over all creation. God is reestablishing his rule that was lost when humanity fell into sin. God’s kingdom is where his will is done (Mat 6:10). The Christian life is not about you and Jesus, it is about King Jesus establishing his eternal kingdom which will one day overtake all the kingdoms of this world and make all things new. With the coming of that kingdom is the warning that he will judge those who reject him, do not repent and believe the gospel (3:10, 11-12).

Questions for Life Groups:

1. Why did Jesus settle in Galilee and did most of his ministry there?
2. What does that tell us about being strategic in the place where we live?
3. What does it mean to repent?
4. Why is a change of mind inadequate definition of repentance?
5. Discuss Thomas Watson’s definition, “repentance as a grace of God’s Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed.”
6. What is the key phrase here? How can repentance be a work of grace and still our reasonability?
7. Discuss Wayne Grudem’s definition “repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ.”
8. What are some key phrases in this definition?
9. How are we to live a life of repentance?
10. How is a life of repentance like peeling an onion?

1. The synoptics give no mention of Jesus’ earlier ministry, about a one year overlap with John the Baptist’s ministry that the Gospel of John mentions (1:19-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wilkins 173; Matthew often quotes Isaiah when he speaks of Jesus’ ministry extending to the Gentiles. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wilkins, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Blomberg, 88. See also Jn 8:12, Jesus is light of the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p.713. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Keener 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)