



THE ATTITUDE THAT JESUS REQUIRES

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Luke 4:14-21

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It's hard to forget "first time" experiences. We never forget the first time we left home, the first kiss, the first time behind the wheel, the first job, the first stirrings of an idea that would change the direction of our lives. As Christians, we remember the first answered prayer, the first Bible study, our first steps of faith in obedience to Christ, our first attempts at explaining to someone how God had changed us. It seems the first time we do things sets the stage for the second and third and fourth times.

Have you ever wondered if this was our Lord's experience? Did he arrive on the scene fully formed as a servant of God, or were his first movements towards maturity and ministry as awkward as our own? How did his first attempts at preaching the gospel sound? That may be a strange question to ask on Palm Sunday. On this day we do not remember Jesus' first steps in ministry, but rather his last. If we go back to his first attempts at preaching the gospel, however, we will find that there was something going on at the beginning of his ministry that would set the stage for what would occur at the end.

Following our Lord's baptism in the Jordan River, and his temptation in the wilderness, Luke, in chapter 4 of his gospel, which we will take for our text, hits the fast forward button, as it were, moving ahead in the life of Jesus to his return to Galilee for an extended period, a time that scholars call the "Great Galilean Ministry." Galilee, an area of about fifty square miles, is in the northern part of Palestine. It has a large lake in the middle, which is surrounded by small villages. Jesus had grown up in Nazareth, one of these villages. It is here, in Galilee, that the writer presents Jesus, cutting his teeth in ministry, taking his first steps in preaching the gospel.

Luke begins by giving a brief account of those early days in Galilee. Chapter 4, verses 14-15:

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. (NASB)

As we begin our text, Luke still has his finger on the fast forward button. In these verses he summarizes a number of months of ministry by simply stating that Jesus ministered "in the power of the Spirit." In Luke's mind, this was the same as saying that Jesus was the Son of God, and thus, co-equal with the Father. We

know from the other gospel accounts that Jesus demonstrated as much by performing a number of miraculous healings during this time. Luke also says that Jesus "began teaching." All of this created quite a stir, as people were very impressed with this young preacher from Galilee.

It is not until verse 16 that the narrative slows down. When that occurs, invariably it is because something important is taking place. In this case, Luke wants to show what kind of preaching would draw such attention. In the following verses, he now presents the first sermon that Jesus preached in Nazareth (16-21):

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written,

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He 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."**

And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus enters the local synagogue in Nazareth, his home town, a place he had attended many times as a boy. If later tradition is any indicator, the service would have started with a recitation of what Jews called the Shema: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5). Following this, prayers would have been offered; then came the Scripture reading. First, a text from the law would be read, and then a text from the prophets. It was customary for the reader to stand; then, following that, he would sit down make some comments on the Scripture he had read.

So Jesus "stood up to read" from the prophets. No doubt he was invited to read. He had been causing a stir, and people wanted to hear what he had to say. His reading, from the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61:1-2, proph-

ecies the coming ministry of the Messiah. Then he sat down, and people waited for his comments. His words were brief, but shocking: *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* This would have echoed like thunder through the synagogue. They were not listening to just another Bible reading. Jesus was saying, “Something is happening in this room today which Isaiah predicted six hundred years ago. I am the fulfillment of that prediction.”

It is said that every good preacher knows his audience. Notice that there were four groups here who were the target audience of Isaiah’s passage, and thus, by extension, Jesus’ sermon. They were: the poor, the captives (prisoners), the blind, and the downtrodden or oppressed (slaves). Each of these groups had something in common: they were all mired in difficult situations from which they had no hope of escape; they were all helpless. When we think of the poor today, we feel that if someone works hard and gets a few breaks, he or she could break free of their poverty. That was not the case in Jesus’ day. Back then, if you were born poor, you died poor. When we think of prisoners today, we feel that if a prisoner gets a decent lawyer and behaves well, he can get “sprung.” It was not so in Jesus’ day. Once you were in prison, you stayed in.

It was the same thing with the blind—a common affliction in Jesus’ day. Then, there was no cure for loss of sight, no cataract surgery or other procedures that we take for granted today. It was hopeless. And what about the “downtrodden”? This is a word that describes slaves. We thank God for the Emancipation Proclamation, but in that day, if one was born into slavery, or captured as a slave, he died a slave. So these four groups all shared a common plight: they were in a hopeless, helpless situation which they were powerless to change. No amount of ingenuity, hard work or right connections could set them free.

A few years ago, I traveled to Mexico with some friends to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of inmates in a prison. I remember so well one prisoner who approached us. She was a young girl, not more than seventeen or eighteen years old. She told us her story through a translator. She explained that she was in prison for no reason; there had been a mix-up, she said. The longer she spoke, the more emotional she became. There was a look of desperation in her eyes. It was clear that there was little hope for her ever getting a hearing. We could not help her; she was in a helpless condition.

These are the people Jesus says he came for, those for whom his coming will be good news: people who are stuck and for whom no amount of hard work, cleverness or right connections can work to deliver them. It is to these people that Jesus says, *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

It is clear that one of the things Jesus is saying here is that he is the promised Messiah. He is the one whom

Isaiah wrote about. But the more I have thought about it, the more I have come to see that Jesus was also saying something about the people listening to him that day, and all who would listen to him thereafter. He was saying, “YOU are the poor...YOU are the imprisoned... YOU are the blind...YOU are the oppressed. That is true today, right here in this synagogue. Today, something is happening, and for you to be a part of it requires that you see yourself as poor and blind and imprisoned and enslaved.”

Let’s bring this into the present. What if Jesus were here in this building today? What if he were the guest preacher? What would he say? I think he would say the same thing about you and me that he said about his friends at Nazareth. He would say, “You are the poor... you are the imprisoned...you are the blind...you are the oppressed.”

And what would we say in response? “Who? Me? How can I be poor, with my Stanford degree, my Silicon Valley job, my three-bedroom house? How can I be imprisoned when I’m free to travel or move or do whatever I want? How can I be blind, with my strong body that works out four times a week—and my health insurance, just in case something goes wrong? How can I be oppressed when I’m the boss and people take orders from me?”

To all of this, Jesus says, “Yes, you.” He is always looking deeper than the surface things of our lives. It was true in that synagogue in Nazareth; and it is true today. He is looking beneath the surface, where we categorize ourselves in terms of education and jobs and cars and houses and family, and he is saying, “When I look at the core of your soul, I see poverty; I see blindness; I see imprisonment; and I see oppression.”

Isn’t that what Jesus was always doing? In John 8, the Pharisees said to him, “We are Abraham’s offspring and have never been enslaved to anyone.” But Jesus said to them, “Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.” In John 9, the Pharisees said to Jesus, “We are not blind, are we?” Yet his favorite label for them was “blind guides.”

Jesus requires that we make a radical shift in how we define ourselves. We have to change our minds about ourselves. The Bible has a word for it. That word is *repentance*. We don’t like that term though, do we? It conjures up images of red-faced preachers with a southern drawl who have been to too many church potlucks! But this is an extremely important word in the Bible. Repentance was the essence of what Jesus called people to. If there is one word that defines the early preaching of Jesus, repentance is it. Matthew records our Lord’s first preaching this way: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Mark records it this way, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.”

Repent means “to change.” It means to change your mind about yourself; to see how wrong you have been;

to grieve over what you have become, and to seek to change. My ten-year-old daughter played on a basketball team this past winter. It was enjoyable to watch these girls making their first attempts at playing what can be a fairly complicated and difficult game. Every once in a while, one of the girls got turned around, and she would start heading for the wrong basket with the ball. When that happened, everyone, teammates, fans, and coaches, would start yelling, "Stop! Turn around! Wrong way!" Hopefully, she heard and saw and turned around before she made a basket for the other team.

That is repentance. It starts with that moment when we say, "I'm going the wrong way!" Repentance requires a fundamental attitude that says, "I need to change. I've been completely wrong about myself. I am not rich; I am poor. I am not free; I am imprisoned. I cannot see; I am blind. I am not in control; I am oppressed."

Coming to that point requires that we let go of certain attitudes. We have to let go of our denial, which says, "I don't need to change. Everything is fine." We have to let go of our defensiveness, which says, "It's not that big a deal. Nobody's perfect." We have to let go of our tendency to blame others: "I may need to change, but everyone else is at fault, too." And we have to let go of our tendency to procrastinate, which says, "I may need to change, but I'll wait until tomorrow."

Let me guess what you are thinking right now. You are saying, "That's all fine and good, but I've done that. I've repented, and now I'm going the right way. I came to a point in my life where I admitted I was blind to the truth and enslaved to sin. I'm not like those Pharisees anymore. I'm a Christian. I've been saved. God has forgiven my sin, restored my sight and empowered me to walk in the truth." Most of us who have come to Christ think of repentance the way we think of an old toy: we have fond memories of it, but we certainly wouldn't want to play with it anymore; we've grown out of it.

But consider this. In the book of Revelation, there are seven letters written by Jesus to seven different churches. As far as we can tell, these were churches much like mine and yours—places filled with people who had come into a relationship with Christ and were sitting under the teaching of the Word. And yet, to five out of seven of those churches, Jesus says, "Repent! Change your mind. Look at yourself and say, 'I need to be changed.'" Actually, to the church of Laodicea he says something akin to what we read here in Luke 4. He says, "You say 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." And then he says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore and repent."

Five out of seven—good odds that if he were to come to my church in Foster City or your church here in Cupertino, he would say, "Repent! Change your mind

about yourself. Come to that place where you say, 'I am wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.'" Until we come do this, Jesus can do little for us.

What a contrast to how I so often deal with areas of my life where I feel I'm falling short. For years, I have felt inadequate, and even at times like a failure, as a spiritual leader in my home. And yet I find ways to tuck that area away and never really bring my sense of utter helplessness to God. I deny that it's really that bad. I get defensive. I blame others. I promise I'll deal with it—tomorrow. But all God really wants from me is to come to him in my brokenness and helplessness and acknowledge what I am. That is when he begins to work. And that process never stops for the Christian.

The greatest harvest we are seeing these days at my church is with recovering addicts and alcoholics, because the recovery process requires that one must come to that place where he says, "I need to be changed and I am powerless to change myself." And one beautiful thing about the recovery process is that it doesn't end once you get sober. You are trained every single day to say to a group of fellow strugglers, "Hi, my name is Mark. I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict." They may have been sober for twenty years, but they still say it. They never grow out of it, because they know that it's only from that place of brokenness that real change can occur and be sustained.

Jesus brings very good news to people who have come to recognize their need. The text says that he is uniquely equipped to help us: *the Spirit of the Lord is upon him*. He is the Son of God. He has the power and the authority to free us and to restore our sight.

The last phrase in verse 19, "To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord," refers to what the Jews called the Year of Jubilee. In Leviticus, God told the Jews that every fifty years, the Year of Jubilee, all debts were to be canceled within Israel, and everyone who was in bondage as a result of debt set free. If someone had to sell his property so he would not starve to death, on the Year of Jubilee he got his land back. In essence, every fifty years God said, "I'm going to give you a 'do over.' I'm going to give you a new start." Think of that. Every fifty years your MasterCard or Visa bill would be zeroed out! I'd spend big on the forty-ninth year! But that is what Jesus offers. He says, "I've come to bring in a Jubilee. If you are poor, if you are in prison, if you are blind, if you are oppressed, you are going to be set free. What you can't change, I can. All you have to do is turn to me and say, 'I need to be changed, and trust that you are the one who can do it.'"

How is that possible? you ask. How is it possible for Jesus to set us free? The answer is, through the events which we celebrate this week. It is possible because of the cross, where Jesus took upon himself the sin of the whole world. It is possible because, having been raised from the dead, he proved himself victorious over sin,

death, and the devil.

But we have to stop the denial, the defensiveness, the blaming and the procrastination. We have to stop trying to manage our problems, our weakness and our sin, and simply cast ourselves upon the mercy of God, trusting that he can change us. We have to see ourselves at the bottom rather than the top. If we don't, then the second half of Isaiah 61:2 will be true for us. In the text, following the words, "To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," come the words, "And the day of vengeance of our God." Jubilee for some; vengeance for others. Jubilee for those who say, "I need help"; judgment for those who say, "I'm doing fine, thank you. A few problems, yes, but I can handle them." That was the situation of many people in Galilee that day. Jesus knew it, and when he confronted them on it they tried to destroy him. Those who welcomed them into their synagogue and handed him the prophetic scroll couldn't bear a Messiah who would talk about them like that.

And that is why this text at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is so helpful in understanding what happened at the end of his ministry, on Palm Sunday and the days following. Those who welcomed him into their city as the promised Messiah, with shouts of "Hosanna to God in the Highest," turned around a week later and shouted, "Crucify him." How could they do that? How could we do it? My guess is, because they had never come to grips with the very thing Jesus tried to get them to see: their need to repent, their need of a Savior. How do you prepare for Holy Week? Say it again and again and again: God help me. I need to change.

I think of John out in the Jordan River, baptizing peo-

ple who were ready to repent. Allow me to use a little sanctified imagination here. People are coming to John, but before they enter the water, they have to get in line and register at a table. The table is stacked with notebooks. A woman comes to the table, and the man asks, "What's your name?" She says, "My name is Mary Jones." He searches among the notebooks and finds one that says on the cover, "Mary Jones, sinner." Inside are listed all of her sins. She takes the notebook and heads for the water to wait for John to baptize her. Next, a man comes to the table, gets his notebook and heads out for the water. And one by one, everyone who wants to be baptized gets his or her personalized notebook, their names printed in big letters, with the word "sinner" underneath, and all their sins listed inside.

But then a man, a different man, walks up to the table. He is asked his name and he says, "Jesus." There is no notebook on the table with his name on it, but he heads out to the water anyway. When he arrives where the people are lined up ready to get baptized, he begins asking them one by one to give him their notebooks. One by one they do that, some reluctantly, others gladly, until soon his arms are piled high with notebooks that are filled with their sin. It is a heavy load. He walks out into the water and says, "Baptize me, John." And under the water he goes. As he comes up out of the river, the notebooks are swept away in the current.

How do we prepare for Good Friday and Easter? Every day we have to take our notebook. Every day we have to get in that line. Every day we have to give our notebook to Jesus. And every day we believe that through him our sin has been swept away. Amen.

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