

A Ministry Begins

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so Jill read for us Matthew chapter 4, if you're able to follow that, that would be great. It was from verse 12. Thomas last week looked at the temptation of Jesus and today we're following that on with what happened after that that Matthew records for us. If you're visiting with us, we're doing a kind of, I think probably it'll be quite a long study in Matthew's gospel in our morning worship. And the good thing is it's lots of variety about that and it's a focus on Jesus very specifically on his life and that's good and it's great always to go back to the gospels. And so that is that section today that Jill read is what we're going to be looking at. I think it's sometimes good for us just to take a step back and remind ourselves a little bit of Jesus Christ because we're living now 2000 years or so after the life of Jesus is recorded here. And we ask the question, well why is it that people are still talking about following, living in the name of Jesus and are becoming Christians and being baptized? Why are you coming here today again week after week to worship Jesus or at least to find out maybe more about Jesus if you're not a Christian? Because interestingly globally, maybe not so much here in Scotland, but globally Christianity last year grew by one point roughly to one point two seven percent throughout the world. There's around 2.5 billion Christians in the world. Many people's lives are still being hugely affected by this person, Jesus Christ. I've devoted my life to telling people to follow Jesus and follow Him because we can't follow anyone else and all of that telling I've stumbled so many times myself. And that'll be true for many of you here as well that you live for Jesus and you want other people to follow Jesus. And more than life itself, we will want people maybe who we know who are not Christians, maybe they're here today, we want them to follow Jesus and to put their trust in Jesus. Why is it that we encourage people to follow Jesus? Why do we follow Jesus? Why do we keep following Jesus as believers? Because it's tough, isn't it? You're probably coming today on the back of a week when maybe it's been tough, maybe tough physically, maybe tough in employment terms or in personal terms. There's many different things that make life tough and it can be tough added to that to be a Christian. You know, the prospects for being a Christian in Scotland are not that great. It's not a great place to be to be a Christian or it's not deemed to be a great place to be to be a Christian in modern-day

Scotland. We become moral and ethical pariahs in the society in which we live very often. We're ridiculed and sidelined. Educational and professional elite would have Christianity privatised but probably privatised to oblivion if the truth be told. And Jesus' diagnosis of sin and the dysfunction of our hearts and minds without Him is not a popular diagnosis in people's minds.

Heaven, hell, Satan and angels, all that Thomas spoke about last week with the temptation of Jesus in the desert, is seen as unscientific, it's seen as irrational and insignificant in a post-Christian generation. But what is it about Jesus that makes people change their course of their lives to follow Him and that changes your life and my life and I hope continues to change and ought to be continuing to change our lives forever? I'm just going to ask two questions.

The first is what do we learn about Jesus here in this passage? And then the second question is how can we be like Him? We can't be like Jesus in every way but there are ways in which we can be like Him. So that's the two questions that I would like to ask this morning. So what do we learn about Jesus here in this passage that we have together? Well, it's a different phase that Jesus enters here. It's really His public ministry. In verse 17 we're told, from now on or from that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And this is, although we kind of read it and we read it passively and we see it, again like we saw in different passages before, He really, Jesus bursts onto the scene here very, very publicly and very powerfully. If you remember that when Jesus comes onto the scene, it's not, in some ways it's not unexpected. It's not like He's a complete random that comes onto the scene. We see a little bit that in John's Gospel but we also see it generally as we understand the history is that there was among the Jewish people certainly an expectation that a Savior would come. And there was rumblings that Jesus was indeed that guy, that He was the Messiah, He was the Savior. There was whispers and talks and it was becoming very public in the area where Jesus was. And He had had recent interactions with Peter and James and John and John the Baptist. And all of that had begun to really become the focus of gossip in the whole area. And Jesus was, there was a degree of expectation. And we know as we look at it from

Scripture that His own God's unfolding plan was coming to fruition. But nonetheless, even though there was a level of expectation of Jesus coming here, or at least the Messiah coming and it looked like it could be Jesus, He still acts in a way that's shockingly different to how all those who were looking for the Messiah expected Him to come. And I don't think we should ever lose sight of that when we think about Jesus Christ, because Jesus invariably is shockingly different to what we expect Him to be. In our own lives, in the way He deals with us, in the way He reveals Himself to us, our, what we imagine Jesus to be, or think Jesus should be, is usually quite far from the mark. And as we look to Scripture, we find, and as we look to how Jesus impacts in our lives, that He's constantly shocking and surprising us as followers. And as followers of Jesus, I think there should be that same element of, at least it's some way that we should be a bit shocking in our lives as Christians. And we'll go in and see that in a little bit. But I think we should be, I don't think we should conform to what people's imagination of what a Christian should be like, that we should be like that. I think we're non-conformists, and we don't conform to people's stereotype of what a Christian should be. We shouldn't. So there should be a degree of, it's a made-up word, radicality, okay? I just warn you, I said they happen now again, that we should be radical in our lives, radically different because we follow Jesus. And we're not just conforming to what people's expectations are. And that, well, that should be the case because we're not even conforming to our own expectations of what Jesus is as we learn about Him. So what do we learn? There's a few things we learn about Him here, and I need to explain what I mean when

[7 : 45] I say this. The first thing I think we learn from here among many things that we'll not look at. But one thing we learn is that He's attracted to the darkness, okay? Now I want to explain that, I want to clarify that because it could be misunderstood. But if you look at verses 12 through to verse 16, we have the fact that Jesus left Nazareth, went to Capernaum in the Territory of Zebulun and Naftali, and then this prophecy from Isaiah was spoken, the land of Zebulun, the land of Naftali, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, the Galilee, the Gentiles. The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light for those dwelling in the region, and shadow of death on them a light has dawned. And that's a prophecy from the Old Testament speaking about the coming of the Messiah, coming of Jesus to that particular area. Now it seems that in this different stage of Jesus' early ministry, this more going public as it were, it's like He's taking over from John.

John has been imprisoned, John the Baptist, and Jesus takes over and takes up that kind of public mantle as it were. And very often when we read that passage, and I would have thought this as well, quite often in the past, that He was going to Galilee, and we think of Galilee as a beautiful, idyllic place with a lovely sea of Galilee, and lots of nice little villages just popping around the place, a rural backwater where Jesus would go as a kind of not formally educated man and begin His ministry. It's very far from that. It's very far from that. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, tells us that there was at least four great cities in that area, and there was 200 towns with an accumulated population of probably a nearer half a million people. And it was an interesting, it was really tightly condensed number of people in that area. And some of them were devious, a lot of them were gentiles. And it was regarded as a kind of a bit of a, certainly a religious backwater, if not an economic backwater, certainly it wasn't that. But it was certainly regarded as an economic backwater. And it had been in pagan hands for many years. It wasn't really a place that was strongly under the influence of the Jewish religion. And we see that when Jesus preached there, also large crowds came from the Decapolis, which was the 10 towns to the north-south, the east of Galilee. They were mainly Greco-Roman towns that had been set up by the Roman Empire to house the soldiers after they had finished fighting them and their families. And these cities were known for their pagan worship, their idolatry, their sexual license. They weren't kind of clean cut cities. And yet people from these cities were all, were told in the past, they came from the

Decapolis. And they came to listen to Jesus and what he had to say. And I think that gives us a heart, a hint into the heart and mind of God. In Luke chapter 5 and verse 32, I think we have that on the screen. Jesus says, when he calls Levi, when he calls Matthew the tax collector, he says, I've not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. And therefore, at that, what I mean by my heading there about being attracted to darkness, that Jesus is drawn to the darkness of humanity. These guys weren't any particularly more dark than anyone else in terms of the way God could see their hearts. In fact, quite the opposite. And he was scathing. Jesus was always scathing of those who thought they were religious and who thought they were good and who were righteous in their own eyes because he knew that actually darkness is in the heart of every single human being. And we see Jesus here move to where this crowds of people are, these Gentile peoples in spiritual darkness because of his unshakable love for the lost and the broken. And he sensed and he knew the darkness that they were in. And he came with his great light to bring the gospel to them.

And the gospel for us is recognizing Jesus as the great light who brings light into the darkness and into the sin of our own hearts and into the society in which we live. And the darker we recognize our own moral depravity, the brighter Jesus shines for us. And I guess the opposite is true. The better we think we are, the more righteous we think we are, the less attractive Jesus is to us.

And his light is less pulling towards us in our lives. And it was shocking in many ways that the Messiah would go to this part of Judea, this part of Galilee to the, what had been the exiled northern tribes, the northern tribes that remember in the Old Testament, the exile had fallen to Assyria and had given into idolatry and lost the promises of the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. First to fall, but also the first to hear about Jesus. Because I think Jesus through that is saying they're no different actually. I've come to save people and people are in spiritual darkness unless they come to the light of Jesus and the salvation that he has. And we look for that sense, I think, of darkness in our own hearts, because it draws us to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and hope. So he was attracted to the darkness. But also we see that he had a trinity of influence here in this passage and still does. We're told that Jesus in verse 18, sorry, verse 23, he went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming or preaching the gospel, he speaks about him earlier, preaching the gospel of repentance and healing every kind of disease and affliction among the people. And these give us three different elements of the life and the work of Jesus that are still significant for us. He was a teacher and that means primarily he was telling the people things that they need spiritual truths, primarily from the

[14 : 21] Old Testament he was speaking and revealing to them, imparting knowledge to them about themselves and about the truth of God and about the reality of who he was, appealing to their minds and their reasons. So we appeal to our, the gospel, we look for it to appeal to our minds and to reason that's not irrational. There's times it's above reason, but it's not irrational. And we're not losing our minds when we follow Jesus Christ. It's not for the illiterate and uneducated alone. It is for all people, scientists and educationalists because the gospel appeals to our mind and Jesus taught truth appealing to the mind, but also speaks of him as a preacher, a proclaimer here.

And that in the Bible is a different, slightly different connotation. It's about proclaiming the truth with a view to changing the way we behave because our heart has been moved. So it's not just teaching bare facts, but what we have is powerful persuasive preaching that moves the affections. And we see that preaching and teaching are different things in many ways, although they kind of dovetail together. And he wanted to speak in such a way that we'd move people to change their will and their hearts because that was usually important. It's in other words, there's a subjective element as well as the objective truth. There's a subjective movement of our will. Now we see that sometimes today in some of the movements in society. Sometimes they move away from scientific truth and they move towards subjectivism. It doesn't matter what science says, it's just this is what I want. This is what's important to me. This is my body. This is how I want to live. And there's preaching, as it were, but not teaching that they've moved away from scientific reality. But what we find what is really powerful is when facts come and they move us to change. And Jesus preached about repentance and good news. So it's a kind of, it's a paradoxical thing, isn't it? He's saying you're going the wrong way. You need to turn around from the way you're going. You're a sinner and you're in danger and I'm in danger of God's perfect justice condemning us and that's bad news. But he comes with that persuasive good news of his grace and of his love and of his salvation that he goes on, that we have been singing about.

He's a preacher, a teacher, and he's also, we've told there, a healer. And these healings that he did, which were just amazing, were dramatic signs of the power and authority that he had as a teacher and as a preacher. They were proof of his divine origin, of the power of his message, and they pointed towards not just physical healing, but to the inside healing, the darkness that needed to be touched, changed into light and ultimately the physical healing that comes when we trust in Jesus as we live forever with him. So there's teaching and preaching and healing and I think it's important for us to recognize that also. I think Matthew 11, 28 and 29 says, come to me, Jesus has come to me, all you who are labour and heavy-weight and I will give you rest.

My yoke is, take my yoke upon you, learn from me, he says, I'm gentle and lowly hearted, you'll find rest for your souls, you'll find healing. And that is, that was always what Jesus spoke of and that's what he still reminds us of. It's important that we are learning, that we're growing and knowledge of him, that we are moved by that truth when we hear that truth preached in church or when we hear it in a different context, one to one and pray for that.

Really pray that you don't just come on, I just want to learn a few more facts about Jesus here and then leave. It's not that kind of thing, we're wanting the facts of the gospel to affect our wills and our hearts so that we're moved to follow him. There should be in our lives and in the worship, there should be proclamation and urgency, moving our souls to worship. We should be moved to worship. We shouldn't really be moved to fall asleep. It's wrong if we're falling asleep.

[19 : 00] I haven't got it, you haven't got it, none of us have got it. If that's generally why we come to church, I know sometimes we can be tired but if that's the everything we do every week we come with it, it's great, I've got an hour of sleep, then we've misunderstood, we've all misunderstood that the proclamation, the preaching is to move our will and our hearts.

And he says, be healed and he keeps on saying, be healed, we're sick, we need healing, don't stay sick but be healed by his grace and by his love knowing that the best is still to come.

So he had a trinity of influence but he also had, we see in this point that he gets up close and personal. So he was attracted to the darkness, he had a trinity of influence and he gets up close and personal. In verse 19 and then in verse 22 he says, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

And he says that again in verse 22, he says immediately they left their boat and they followed him. So this is an interesting little bit here, isn't it? The first disciples, Jesus says follow me and they follow him and it's stark when you read it. I think if you read that and you don't think it's a bit stark and maybe even a little bit weird, then we've just, it's become too normal for us because you can't imagine anyone just walking out the street and seeing someone you think they've never seen before saying, follow me and they follow them. It seems such a strange thing to do.

But what we need to recognize is that this is just a very, very brief summary of what Jesus did here. And if you look between verse, there's verse 11 where Thomas finished reading last week and then we start at verse 12. Well there's a whole section in John's gospel that fits into that bit and that tells us about Jesus meeting with Peter and meeting with John and they would have heard about his, they maybe listened to him quite a lot at the time, they would have been gossiping and talking about him. So it wasn't like it was the first time he ever saw them and they were fishing and they said, follow me and they just all came and followed him. That seems weird and it doesn't seem to be what was the case. He had clearly interacted with these men and Jesus was obviously the object of gossip and of people's conversation because they came from the decapolis a long way away to hear and preach. The whole region was buzzing with Jesus coming to preach. But what we have here is Jesus reminding us of the importance that there needs to be a decision. There does need to be a time where you get beyond learning and you get simply beyond feeling moved in your heart and then going back to the same way of living. And there does need to be a decision to follow

[21 : 43] Jesus Christ because repenting means turning from not following to following Jesus Christ. That's what it means. Jesus becomes our Lord and our Savior. They made a decision. They knew about the Messiah, they had expectations and they followed Him. They were young, they had no formal education, they were giving up their livelihoods and they were moving away from their home comforts.

But their choice to follow Him was based on His teaching, His preaching and His healing. And within all, probably even more than that, His person as they could listen to Him, the inexplicable recognition that this was God and that He was drawing them with love and that there was authority and that they could worship Him as God. And that was a huge decision for them.

Then we quickly read over that. What a huge decision it was for them requiring great courage, opening up to danger. They needed patience. They needed to reassess what they thought of the Savior.

There was risk. Yet there was assurance that this was the right thing to do. He was the right person to follow. He loved them and He was the Messiah that they were looking for and hoping after.

Follow me. And you know, that remains the same today. We all follow something. If you're not a Christian, it's not that you're not a follower. You are a follower, but it's just not of Jesus. You follow sometimes your own mind. You follow what other people think. You follow your career, you follow whatever it might be. There's all kinds of things. But what is it?

[23 : 31] We implore people to follow Jesus Christ and to keep following Jesus Christ. You know what is saddest for us? When we see people who've come and worshiped here for many years and they stop coming and they fall away from following Jesus, praise God, it's usually only for a while, but it still hurts us to the core because we believe and we are persuaded that following Jesus is the right thing to do. And we have the story of, we have the story of the cross, and we have the story beyond the cross and the resurrection and all that it means.

But it means we need to change our mind and our heart about sin and about what we think of sin and about being attracted to sin. And we must be moved to have our wills and our hearts touched by Jesus Christ, recognizing the offer of His healing and knowing that we are dead, spiritually dead without Him and sick as it were. And I encourage you if you're not a Christian, but maybe you've been coming, maybe you're sitting, I know there's some people here who are searching for Jesus Christ, recognize that it's costly, but recognize it's a step that you need to take to follow Jesus. Your life will never be the same, to get at risk in following Jesus, only from our point of view, not from His. And recognize His promises and put your trust in Jesus Christ. Speak about it with someone today. Make a choice. God is drawing you, and following

Him is worth following a million times over. And we continue as believers to follow you. Maybe you're just on the edge as a Christian of many years of saying, I've had enough of this.

Can I implore you in Jesus' name? Keep following, because it's the way of life, and He is the way of light and not darkness. So just closing for the last five minutes, the second question, how are we there therefore to be like Him? Jesus Christ is the one who is attracted to darkness, he had an eternity of influence, and he gets up close and personal. How can we be like Him as believers, and speaking at this point to us as believers? A couple of things. First is by dispelling darkness ourselves, by being people who dispel the darkness. And that begins by letting His light shine into our hearts, into the dark recesses of our own heart, and right, rooting out, going from here and rooting out all the things that separate us from Him, in an ongoing way, the selfishness sometimes, the greed, the pride, the lust, the hatred, the anger, the kind of things that break our relationships with one another, separate us from one another, help make us judgmental of others.

And by so doing, we're dispelling the darkness in our own heart, as we love His truth and live humbly, independence in the Holy Spirit. And as we do so, we will be attracted to darkness. We'll not want to be monastic. We'll not want simply to be in our own Christian bubble, but we will long for God's kingdom to come, and that will only come as we take the light of Jesus Christ that has transformed our hearts into the darkness of the world around us, because it's the same darkness that's in our hearts. And personal is a church, we want that to be the emphasis we have. That's why we continue in the impossible pathway of planting churches, because we want to reach out with the gospel into the city, which we love and which we long to come to know Jesus, and we want to be like Jesus in that respect, going to where the people are and telling them about His great love, to dispel the spiritual darkness with the light of the gospel and with Christ in us. Only with Christ can we do it, because we are part of the problem. He alone is the answer. We're not the answers, we don't need to be, you know, don't need to have a wrong attitude of ourselves and think that we've got the answers. We don't. Jesus is the answer. We're just as ambassadors, we just fall in.

[27 : 43] Just think of the people that Jesus brought light into their lives and the darkness of their lives, people like Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, Legion. What did they all do? They all went and told their friends. They all went with the God. See what Jesus has done for me. They invited people into their homes. They went back to their cities, and Jesus gave His great seal of approval on them doing that, and they dispel darkness where they were. And that's a great challenge for us to think of into this week in which we're in. How am I dispelling the darkness in the world? This is just my little world, you know, we're not talking about the universe. Just my own circle of influence.

How can I stop a line of gossiping? How can I not do something that's mean that everyone else is doing? How can I be graceful and serve people who are antagonistic towards me? Little things are bringing the light of Christ into the darkness of our lives by dispelling darkness. And I think also by prioritizing His priorities, truth preaching and healing, which He speaks of here. So the ongoing importance of knowing Him, knowing more about Him through His Word, through learning about who He is by developing a strong apologetic for the gospel, by praying, by coming under the sound of preaching and by being spoken to by one another, preaching the gospel to each other in our lives.

But also on the Sunday, the powerlessness of the preaching is always something that's a great weight on a preacher's shoulder. In fact, the people aren't converted, the people that look dull and bored.

That's not important. And it's not the preacher or the institution matters, but that He's given us this day where we can all interact together and seek God to speak to us, to persuade our will and through our hearts to change on a day-to-day basis so that we're not becoming hardened and dull and bored under the sound of the Word, but allowing our heart and will to be moved when we come together and praying towards that. And then as we do so, seeking ongoing healing in our lives, recognizing that, that's basically what sanctification is, there's that ongoing healing. Sometimes it will be physical we're praying for, but more often it's heart healing, heart change, heart closeness, heart growth towards Jesus Christ. And as we do so to intentionally encourage one another over this year, the vision for the year in our walk, in our talk, and as we share that we would prioritize what Jesus prioritizes. And I hope that I strive to do that by His grace, and I hope you will do also. And primarily that we will all be followers, and known as followers of Jesus.

And the great mark of that of course was that they loved one another. Let's pray briefly about these truths. Father God, we desperately need You to help us to live out the reality of being disciples, being followers of being just overwhelmed by Your grace, by Your love, by Your interest in us, by Your desire to come into the darkness of our lives and hearts and death, and to come and bring Your light. And there's so many powerful symbols and images in the Bible of that, no greater than Jesus, the light of the world, being plunged into darkness on the cross as He bore our sins. None of it, none of it a waste, none of it made up symbols or images, but powerful to make us think about what He's done. The greater love is no man than this,

[31 : 58] He would lay down His life for His friends, and He calls His friends when we come to Him. And we pray that we would be known as followers, and we pray for anyone who are on the cusp of following Jesus today here, that they would make that decision like the disciples to follow Jesus, because He is worth it. And if anyone on the cusp of giving up following Jesus today, may they be drawn from the edge to know and love and recognize that the message itself has been absolutely geared for them because of His great love and His great concern. So help us today in our lives, and help us tomorrow and the next day to be followers of Jesus. Amen.