

LESSON 21: THE MISSION OF JESUS (THE KINGDOM OF GOD)

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 8	:	Cover points 1 to 9
For Intermediate Level / Age 11	:	Cover points 1 to 12
For Advanced Level / Age 14	:	Cover points 1 to 15

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous couple of lessons, we learned about the Incarnation, which is God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ. We also learned that God, in Jesus Christ, became a true man who was also true God. He was the Perfect Man, the second Adam. In this lesson, we will learn about the mission of God through this Son of His.

Current lesson:

1. Jesus was the promised Saviour for Israel and for the whole world. Israel's disobedience to God was an example of mankind's sinful ways and our need for God. Although the Bible tells us about Israel's sin of unfaithfulness to God, this problem of unfaithfulness is also true of the whole of mankind, not just Israel alone.

Isaiah 53:6: "We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way..."

Romans 3:23: "No distinction is made: all have sinned and lack God's glory..."

2. We must not forget that God is the Source of creation which He placed under the dominion of humanity when He first created our First Parents. This dominion was handed over to Satan when Adam and Eve were deceived into a willful rebellion against the sole authority and lordship of God.

For this reason, the Gospel of John records that Jesus – for at least three times – identifies Satan as the prince of this world (John 12:31-32, 14:30-31, 16:7-11). In the fall of humanity, creation had now come under the legal dominion of the devil. Of course, this did not mean that God had lost control, for He had plans that the devil knew nothing about (since the adversary can only know what God permits him to know).

3. Meanwhile, when the Fall took place, we see from Sacred Scripture that God seemed to have "changed" the human habitat. In order to constantly keep humanity aware of our need to be saved from our fallenness, God "cursed" creation in order to create a discomfort in our living environment.

Genesis 3:17: "To the man he said, 'Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, accursed be the soil because of you! Painfully will you get your food from it as long as you live.'"

This was so that humanity would long for the restoration of the perfection that had been lost. In the same way, Israel (under exile for over 700 years) was longing for the peace (Hebrew, *shalom*) that only God could bring.

4. In God's divine plan, the restoration of the kingdom that had been taken over by the dominion of Satan became the very mission of Jesus Christ, His Eternal Son. In other words, Jesus came to announce the new beginning of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven. Preaching about God's kingdom was His main priority from the time He began His public ministry at age 30. But before He began His public ministry, Jesus had to go through two experiences first: His Baptism and His temptation in the wilderness.
5. Read Matthew 3:13-17 on the baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River. A question arises as to why Jesus was baptised if He was not a sinner, since Baptism was an act of repentance (although it was not yet a Sacrament at that point). Water, in Scripture, has always been used as a symbol of destruction (for example, the flood in the account of Noah and his ark). In entering into the waters of Baptism, Jesus was accepting His impending death for the sins of humanity. He was entering into the darkness of humanity in order to accompany us by eventually making His way to the cross. In doing this, Jesus was actually sanctifying the waters (i.e. making the waters holy) rather than the waters sanctifying Him. We may say that Jesus baptised the waters in order that the waters would be used to baptise sinners.

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at His Baptism was like an investiture of His messianic office. In the Old Testament, kings and priests of Israel were installed into their offices by being anointed, i.e. pouring oil onto their heads. This anointing was a visible sign of the person being invested with the Spirit of God for the office which he was to hold. In fact, the title Christ (Hebrew, *Mashiach*) means "the Anointed". The Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus was a sign of God bestowing on Him a kingly and priestly dignity in the presence of all the onlookers, whether or not they understood it.

6. Read Matthew 4:1-11 on the temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness of Judea. Even though Satan knew that God would restore His kingdom in His own time, the devil was uncertain as to whether Jesus was actually the Son of God that was to come. It was only when Jesus went out into the wilderness for a while to go undergo the temptations presented by Satan that His real identity was made known to the devil.

St Ephrem the Syrian: "He tempted Jesus because a definite sign of Christ's divinity had not yet been given from heaven."

Upon His Baptism, Jesus entered immediately in the difficulties of human existence by allowing Himself to be tempted by the devil. We can say that He was demonstrating a new example of the Christian life that would follow from His ministry and sacrifice. Baptism would put those who followed Him into a new status of freedom from the power of Satan; Confirmation would impart onto them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and these Sacraments would empower them to defeat the influence that the devil tries to assert upon them. Jesus demonstrated this powerfully in the way He responded to the temptations posed by Satan.

The temptations that the devil presents to us are often persuasions for us to dismiss God as being of less importance (or even total unimportance) to our more urgent preoccupations in life. In many situations of seeming urgent need, such as hunger or physical danger, the devil seems to pose the idea that God is powerless to do anything about it, and that we should therefore stop believing in His sovereignty. The devil then proposes a “better” way: for us to be realistic and to do something about these situations using our own powers. He threatens to make us forget that God does things in accordance with His own timeline, and that it is not up to us to expedite our plans ahead of God’s will. But Jesus demonstrated to mankind that in our Baptism and Confirmation, we would be properly equipped to defeat this diabolical deception.

Upon His Baptism and temptation in the Wilderness of Judea, Jesus began His public ministry.

7. The kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus’ preaching. This is why we find that He spoke most about the Kingdom of God throughout His ministry. References to the “kingdom of God” are found 72 times in the New Testament, and the “kingdom of Heaven” found 32 times (all in the Gospel of Matthew). Both terms are used interchangeably by New Testament writers.

Matthew 4:17: “...Jesus began his proclamation with the message, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.’”

Matthew 6:33: “Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well.”

Mark 1:14-15: “After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the gospel from God saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.’”

Luke 10:9: “Cure those in it who are sick, and say, ‘The kingdom of God is very near to you.’”

John 3:5: “Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit...”

8. All Jesus’ teachings were designed to show people how they might enter the Kingdom of God. His mighty works were intended to prove to his audience that the Kingdom of God had come upon them. His parables illustrated truths about the kingdom of God.

The word “kingdom” may seem very strange to us who are from the modern world, because most countries in the modern world do not have a supreme monarch (king). Perhaps a more familiar word to express what Jesus was proclaiming is *government*. Jesus was declaring to Israel to prepare themselves because the government of God, or the government of Heaven, was going to take over soon!

9. But if the world was under the government of the devil because mankind had fallen into sin, how was God's government going to take over? A price had to be paid. A ransom had to be paid. And Jesus was going to pay it soon on behalf of fallen mankind. But before He paid this price, He spent these three years preparing the hearts of men first, so that when the government of God took over the world, many would give their hearts in love and obedience to God.

It was only under the governance of God that absolute justice and peace could once again be fully restored, thus bringing humanity into its most desired state of restfulness. As Saint Augustine of Hippo rightly prayed, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

10. Read Jesus' teaching on the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12. "The Beatitudes" is a nickname given to this sermon from Jesus by readers of the Bible because in this sermon, He teaches the people about the attitudes they should have if they want to live under God's government. These are the "Be Attitudes".
11. Jesus was teaching the crowds about how to live under the government of God, thus finding happiness for ourselves. The word "blessed" usually found in the English translations of the Bible comes from the word *makarios* in Greek, which literally means "happy" or "blissful". Jesus was teaching the people that those who lived in accordance with the kingdom of God would find themselves being "happy" or "blissful".
12. The Beatitudes can be understood in simple terms:

"Happy are the people who realise that they need a Saviour because they cannot save themselves, because heaven is their home" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:3).

"Happy are the people who are sad when bad things have happened in their lives; they shall be consoled because God will comfort them" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:4).

"Happy are the people who are humble and gentle and put others ahead of themselves, for they will be given the earth" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:5).

"Happy are the people who desire so much to be holy, God will make them truly holy" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:6).

"Happy are the people who are kind and forgiving to others, because God will also be kind and forgiving to them" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:7).

"Happy are the people who always try to please God in what they do and think, because they will be with God" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:8).

"Happy are the people who always try to bring peace to the world and to other people's lives, because they will be sons and daughters of God" (paraphrase of Matthew 5:9).



“Happy are the people who get into trouble for doing the right thing, because they are promised heaven” (paraphrase of Matthew 5:10).

“Happy are you when people humiliate you, hurt you, or are mean to you because of Jesus. Be very happy, because you are promised great rewards in heaven. The prophets in the Bible also received the same kind of treatment because of their obedience to God” (paraphrase of Matthew 5:11-12).

13. During the days of Jesus, the Jews were suffering terribly because they were under the cruel Roman Empire. The Roman rulers confiscated their lands, forced them to pay lots of money, and even raped their wives, mothers, and sisters. Any Jew who dared to come up against these Roman rulers would be killed. Already the laws given by God through Moses specified that the Jews must not be ruled over by any Gentiles (Deuteronomy 17:15); having cruel Gentiles to rule over them made things even worse.
14. Very often, groups of Jewish revolutionaries (i.e. people who were trying hard to challenge and resist the Roman powers) would hide in the hills of Galilee to plot their attacks against these foreign oppressors. So when Jesus led the crowd up onto a mountain in Galilee, many people probably were expecting that this famous miracle-working preacher might be bringing them up there to plan some kind of revolt against the Roman Empire under the banner of his new kingdom.

They must have been rather shocked when He preached a long message of peace and reconciliation (Matthew 5-7). This entire sermon is called “The Sermon on the Mount”. The Beatitudes was a part of the entire Sermon on the Mount. Teachings such as “Blessed are the gentle” (Matthew 5:4), “Blessed are the merciful” (Matthew 5:7), “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9), “Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:11), were probably shocking to His listeners because these teachings contradicted the spirit of revolutionaries who came onto the mountains of Galilee to conspire against the Roman authorities. Considering everything that the Jews had suffered under the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus, obeying a teaching like “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44) would have been a very difficult exhortation to swallow.

15. The Sermon on the Mount, as well as the Beatitudes (which is a part of the Sermon on the Mount), continues to apply to us today if we consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus. It is not designed to be easy to follow; rather, it is designed to make us holy and to make us ready for God to rule in our hearts and our lives.

We must think about the worst enemies in our lives and consider if we are willing to learn to apply the Sermon on the Mount in the way we treat them. Only in doing so can we have a place in the kingdom of Heaven.



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