

The year of the Lord's favour

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[0 : 00] This is the first Lord's Day of a brand new year. And Isaiah writing his prophecy speaks out of the year of the Lord's favor.

He says, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to grant to those who mourn in Zion, to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit, that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

The year of the Lord's favor. It comes through the coming of the Son of God into this world. But my question this evening is, what will 2020 be for you?

Will it be the year of the Lord's favor? The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6, for he says, Can I at the outset of this address this evening say to any of you who do not know the Lord, Lord, do not delay your coming to him.

Do not leave it any longer. Do not let this day end without settling the matter, without coming to him, because you don't know whether he will call again, whether he will come to you again.

[2 : 24] For today is the favorable time. Now is the day of salvation. And we should secure it by his grace.

And will this year really be that for you? I pray that it will be. And that you won't let this year go on any further without coming to the Lord and coming to him to find what he has in his treasure store for all who seek him and call upon his name.

But let's turn to another scripture and back to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 2. Now we've looked together over these last few weeks, and may I add, as I did this morning, a personal note that it's been a great privilege to be ministering to you God's word at this season just for this short while.

And we've looked at Philippians 2 alongside Matthew 2. And we've taken both in a fairly superficial manner because we haven't had time to look any more closely at these chapters.

But I hope that what we have done has been profitable. We could have looked as we have come. We've mentioned the gifts that the wise men brought.

[4 : 07] But we could have looked in more detail and asked ourselves, what's the significance of these gifts? What do they mean? What do they signify in their giving?

Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem? And we didn't explore that in any detail. Or we could have looked at any of the prophecies and all of the prophecies in some detail.

So there's plenty there for you to take away for further meditation. But I pray that what we have done in the broad sweep has been of use.

The Lord's word does not return to a void but accomplishes that that he wills. And I've tried to develop our understanding of these particular chapters.

And I trust, therefore, that the Lord will work his word into each of our hearts, whether to challenge us, encourage us, or open our blind eyes to his truth.

[5 : 18] But we turn again to Matthew chapter 2 and the first 11 verses. And I'm going to read them to you again. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For from you shall come a ruler who shall shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him. After listening to the king, they went on their way, and behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place, where the child was.

[6 : 53] And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Now there are two things that should attract our attention in these familiar verses.

The first is that it was these travellers, these wise men, these magi from the east, that came to worship Jesus.

And they're totally out of place. they don't belong in Bethlehem. They should have a sense of amazement and awe, realizing that God had worked to lead these men over hundreds of miles and weeks of travel to find Jesus.

And yet they're completely out of place in this story. they don't belong in Bethlehem. They aren't even of the right nationality.

[8 : 15] Jesus was born King of the Jews, but they weren't Jews. They didn't have the right religious background either.

They might not even perhaps have believed in the right God. And yet, led by God's star, they made their way to Jesus.

Perhaps they expected to see banners waving and trumpets blowing and dignitaries coming from around the world to bow before the new king.

But nothing like that was happening in Bethlehem. By the time they arrived, Bethlehem had returned to normal. The Roman census was over.

The people had paid their taxes. Most had gone back to their hometowns. The streets were quiet once again. No one seemed to be aware that a king was living among them there in Bethlehem.

[9 : 21] In spite of all that, God still led the wise men to Mary and Joseph and to Jesus. Even though no one else seemed to care, they bowed down and worshipped him.

Presenting their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Doesn't that strike you as remarkable? Unusual?

But there's another thing. Did you notice as well that there are no religious leaders there? The chief priests and the teachers of the law, they're not there.

Nor the Sadducees. Of all people, you would expect, they should have been the very first ones there to worship Jesus. After all, they were the religious leaders.

They were the ones who led the people in prayers each day in the temple, begging God to send the Messiah now.

[10 : 27] They were the scholars. They knew exactly where Jesus was to be born. And yet they weren't there. Herod asked them. And they didn't hesitate, it seems, to pass the information on, that the Messiah was going to be born in Bethlehem, in Judea.

But when God had answered their prayers, when Jesus actually came, they didn't go to see him.

Even though they knew that the Messiah was to be born just six miles away from them in Bethlehem, they didn't even bother to go and welcome him.

Don't you think that's strange? When God sent his son, the long-awaited Messiah to earth, the ones who should have been there welcoming him, were nowhere to be found.

Instead, he was greeted by common people, by shepherds, the scum of the society, the poor and forgotten people.

[11 : 39] They watched their flocks at night. And then these foreigners, these Gentile dogs, as they were called by the Jews, strangers from a faraway country, these are the ones who came.

The people should have been there, but they were not. So those who should have been there were not to be found, and those you wouldn't expect came and worshipped him.

But as you look at the life of Jesus, you see that the same thing happened over and over again. It so consistently happens that we have to ask, what is God trying to tell us?

Well, first of all, it seems to me that God is trying to tell us something about who should come to the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. In Matthew 19, we're told that a rich young ruler came to Jesus and he said, he seems to have had the right words, he seems to have had the right attitude, he said, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[13 : 13] And he came to Jesus with the right question, if you like. Jesus could have used him with his wealth and prominence, but with his backing, Jesus could have made himself a celebrity overnight.

Yet when it comes to the showdown, this rich young ruler is not to be found with Jesus. He could make a good talk about dedication and service to God, but he wasn't willing to put it into practice.

It sounded so great, but we don't see him following Jesus. Then there were the Pharisees and the Sadducees, very religious.

They were always there when the doors of the synagogue were open. They obediently dropped their tithes into the offering each week. When it came to pray, when sacrifices were being offered for sin, they were there.

So humble, so pious, so looking the part and playing the role, going through the religious motions. If anyone's going to be standing faithfully by Jesus' side, it looks like it should be these, and yet it isn't.

[14 : 49] But then look at those who came and who did follow Jesus, who did listen to him and were found with him. Look at the disciples.

A number of them were fishermen with fish scales beneath their fingernails, smelling of the sea. You find also among Jesus' followers a zealot with his beady eyes who once might have taken you into a dark alley to stab you to death.

You'll find a tax collector who might have once been willing to have taken every last penny from you. But these are the people who surround Jesus and with whom he has built his kingdom.

Jesus spent so much time with these kinds of misfits and sinners that he was criticized for it.

He was eagerly welcomed by the poor, the lonely and the hurting, by the blind, by the lepers, by those who were never allowed to participate in the mainstream of society.

[16 : 04] These were hurting, hungry people, and those who were crying from the depths of their hearts. They don't belong.

They don't fit. Yet it's they who are the ones who listened and benefited. These are the ones who gathered round Jesus.

Well then, what does this say to us? You see, there's something that really should bother us as we look at ourselves.

We all look so nice and respectable today, don't we? Our faces are clean. There aren't any holes in our clothing.

We look like what we think a church ought to be like. We come here and we pray and we give our offerings. We listen to sermons and it's all so nice and we fit in together so neatly, well nearly outwardly anyway.

[17 : 13] But then when we look back at Jesus and his disciples, the warning should be sounding. Beware because you may not fit in at all.

Is it possible? You're here. But maybe that's the question we ought to be asking ourselves this evening. Why did the chief priest miss his birth?

Where were the Pharisees and Sadducees? Why were they so insensitive to Jesus and unconcerned about his message? Maybe they weren't always like that.

Maybe when they first started out, they started out as sincere people, God-seeking people, sensitive to the love of God. And when the doors of the synagogue opened, they came searching for something meaningful in their lives, and they found it.

But somehow along the way, those things that once were so holy to them became commonplace. now they could handle them and never really even gave them a second thought.

[18 : 34] Maybe the promise of a sacrifice that would atone for sin had lost some of its wonder. We've remembered the coming of the Son of God, but have we been indifferent to it?

Is it just matter of fact? Oh yes. But we, like these people, have lost a sense of worship and adoration and praise for the one who has come.

We've lost a sense of the glory of prayer, that great privilege that we have of coming before the King of Kings and coming and making our requests to him.

Maybe the promises of God have lost some of the excitement because it seems so long since God made them and maybe we haven't seen much by way of him fulfilling those promises.

somehow day by day, week by week, some of the excitement and the cutting edge of faith has dulled.

[19 : 59] It's become a ritual. And probably that was true of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Is it true of us?

is this a ritual coming to church but the excitement of meeting with the Lord, of coming into his presence, it's gone.

And we just carry out this habit perhaps of a lifetime but we've lost the sense of what we're doing.

is it that we can walk past beggars, those who are crying for help, we don't even hear them.

Is it that these Pharisees and Sadducees could no longer smell the stench of decaying flesh of lepers and they were never moved with compassion?

[21 : 16] Is it that we can see the hungry and never be moved to feed them? Are we no longer concerned about other people who are searching for some meaning in life?

We may be pillars of the community but how many are we passing by oblivious to their existence because our sensitivity is gone?

We need to ask ourselves this question. It seems to me that this passage is challenging us. Have we come to think that by going through the rituals, observing the rules and regulations, that we're satisfying God?

And somehow he'll bless us because we're doing the right thing. We need to be very careful.

We need to be very careful that our religious practices are not mechanical and we go through only the motions.

[22 : 45] We sing. We attend. but our heart isn't in it. We need to examine ourselves.

We need to do so before the Lord because it's very easy to fall into this trap and to become like the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the others of Israel.

Insensitive, unaware of the presence of Christ. God were to pour out his spirit this evening, would we know it because we're so insensitive to the presence of the Lord?

So it raises the question, how sensitive are we? How sensitive are we to the needs of others? How sensitive are we to our own need?

Are we sensitive to the poor woman who hears the doctor say, I'm sorry, but we did everything for him that we could?

[24 : 11] Now, along with her grief, she finds herself in a different world. She's always been part of the world of couples. but now she doesn't fit in.

Just how sensitive are we to widows and widowers and divorcees? How sensitive are we to lonely teenagers or lonely anyone who feel out of place?

us? How sensitive are we to visitors even that come into this building? Do we ignore them if they're not part of our community, of our little clique?

we have to be so careful that our Christianity hasn't become a veneer, but it goes no deeper than the surface.

us? And then how sensitive are we to the people who never even darken the doors of our church?

[25 : 30] People who are a nuisance, people who aren't able to manage their lives, they're so foolish. How would we feel if they came in this evening?

Would we make way for them? Or would we resent their being here? They don't fit in to our little group.

You see, we're in great danger, great danger, that we've lost a sense of who we are and what the Lord has done for us.

We don't realize that were it not for his grace, we could be in a far worse situation than the worst person on the island.

God we take for granted what the Lord has done for us.

[26 : 51] It ought to bother us. God, how can we say that we are fit with Jesus until we have a deep concern, a deep compassion for the lost, for the needy.

Jesus should not have come the way he did, we say.

The world expected more of God than that, born in a stable, laid in a manger. What was God thinking of?

The world expected his ministry to be different too. the world expected the rich, the important, the influential to be his friends.

People who count, people who fit in, but it wasn't so. Have we got it wrong? Oh, let this flag of warning bring us up short this evening, at the outset of this new year.

[28 : 44] We who feel so comfortable, we who think that God owes us his benefits and his kindnesses, and we don't realize just how lost we were or are still.

When we come in the communion season, what does it mean to us? What does it mean to us to handle the elements of bread and wine?

we're lost a realization of what they represent? Our blessed Lord died for us. He shed his blood, his body was broken, but does it mean anything to us any longer?

Or can we casually drop our money into the offering plate and yet we never rejoice because God has given us so much?

We take it for granted. We should have. We deserve. can you look at the cross and not be moved by the blood that was shed upon it?

[30 : 15] Can we hear the cries of a lost world and do nothing? There were those who did fit in.

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, Nicodemus, a religious man. Each one were there for Jesus when they were needed. There was Lazarus, Mary and Martha, friends of Jesus.

They fit in too. So my plea is this evening. Where do you fit in?

Or do you fit? You're the only one who can answer that.

But I do know this, that it doesn't matter whether we're rich or poor, whether we're wise men or shepherds, whether we're educated or not.

[31 : 26] there is a place for us in the gospel. And if you do find yourself outside this evening, Jesus bids you come.

Come to him. He won't cast you away. He won't say no. He's promised to receive all who come to him.

No matter who you are, what you are, come. So then, the Lord calls us all to examine ourselves, to see whether we have faith, to see whether our zeal for the Lord has cooled and we're taking it all for granted.

And we're just acting mechanically. He's calling us to be his, to have a heart set on fire for him, a commitment, a zeal for him, to serve him, to carry out his will and his purposes.

all may God grant to each one of us that though we are helpless sinners in and of ourselves, that he will show us mercy and pardon and that our hearts will be set on fire for him.

[33 : 14] let's pray. Let's pray.