

# The compassionate priority of Jesus

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[ 0 : 00 ] So our reading's taken from Luke chapter 4, starting at verse 31. And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and he was teaching them on the Sabbath.

And they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent and come out of him.

And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. And they were all amazed and said to one another, What is this word?

For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits and they come out. And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region. And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house.

[ 1 : 08 ] Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she rose and began to serve them.

Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him. And he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

And demons also came out of many, crying, You are the Son of God. But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak because they knew that he was the Christ.

And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him and would have kept him from leaving them.

But he said to them, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well. For I was sent for this purpose. And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

[ 2 : 04 ] Thank you. Natasha, thanks very much for reading for us. Thank you, I have my welcome. My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the Minister of Grace Church. And it's great to have you with us this morning.

We have prayed already for God's help as we look at his word together. So I want to begin by reading a quote. And I wonder what you make of it. It's becoming more and more urgent to distinguish between a vague Christianity and a Bible Christianity.

The words of Henry Waste. He was one time Dean of Canterbury Cathedral. In 1923, he became vice president of the newly established Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society, or Crosslinks, as we now know it.

And he said those words at a time remarkably similar, I think, to today. A time when churches and Christian organizations, which had once been strongly and clearly evangelical, were compromised. And fell in line with the culture and cultural pressure, rather than faithfully holding on to the teaching of the Bible. Now I said last week that this series in Luke 4 and 5 will serve as something as a spiritual health check for us.

[ 3 : 35 ] Individually, yes. But also corporately for us as a local church. In other words, to make sure that ours is not a vague Christianity, but a genuinely Bible Christianity.

I take it that is important for every one of us in this room this morning. Those who would consider themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ already, as well as those who are looking in on the Christian faith also.

Last week, if you were here, we asked the question, is Jesus' gospel our gospel? Or have we gone off track? Or are we in danger of going off track?

Do listen online if you missed it. And today, as we look at that reading, Luke chapter 4, verses 31 to 44, we're asking the question, is Jesus' priority, our priority, individually and collectively. Choices, decision making, priorities. I think they're all the kinds of things which most of us find pretty difficult, aren't they? Because of course, if I'm going to say that A is a priority, then it follows that B cannot be a priority.

[ 4 : 47 ] And we find those kinds of things very, very difficult indeed. Indeed. So, on the outline, first of all, the proclamation of the kingdom. The first of the three points on the outline on the back of the service sheet.

The proclamation of the kingdom. It's hard, isn't it? As I guess you notice, as Petasha read the passage for us, it's very hard to miss Luke's emphasis here on the enormous authority and power of Jesus' words to confront and drive out evil and sickness.

Notice verse 31, Jesus' teaching. The word has a sense of attitude of continuously teaching. In other words, this is his regular pattern of ministry.

In verse 32, they were astonished at his teaching for his word-possessed authority. Notice in verse 35, it's the word of Jesus, the rebuke of Jesus, that silences and drives out the demon.

And in verse 36, of all the things that people might have said, oh, you know, what a terrible commotion. Or that was a bit loud. Or, you know, we've never seen anything like this before.

[ 5 : 52 ] No, they say, what is this word? For with authority and power, he commands the unclean spirits and they come out. And then in verse 39, he simply rebukes the fever and it leaves, as he does with the demons in verse 41.

In other words, you see, no one who saw Jesus and heard Jesus responded with the kind of indifference to Jesus that is so common today. Which shows, of course, that indifference to Jesus really is ignorance.

Ignorance of the real Jesus. Because we see here Jesus exercising the kind of power and authority that we'd normally associate with God himself.

The power of the creator, who at the beginning spoke and the whole of creation came into being. Here he is, in his world, driving out evil and sickness.

The very things, of course, evil and sickness, which have a grip on so many. And yet, with just a word, Jesus drives them out. They obey him.

[ 7 : 05 ] All achieved as he speaks. Just as Jesus said in his manifesto, which we looked at last week. Do you remember how in chapter 4, verses 18 and 19, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61 in the Old Testament to make the point that he came as a preacher, first and foremost, with a message to proclaim.

Look back to Luke chapter 4, verse 18. Jesus says he's come to proclaim good news to the poor. To proclaim liberty to the captives. Verse 19. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In other words, this is how you see Jesus will establish his kingdom. Through proclamation.

Through teaching. Through preaching. And it's clear, isn't it, that these evil spirits, they recognize and understand the full implications of Jesus' manifesto.

Verse 34. Have you come to destroy us? Well, yes. Jesus has. Because he is, as they recognize, the Holy One of God. Likewise, sickness and disease are driven out.

We'll ignore the temptation to make mother-in-law jokes at this point. But of course, the one thing we must not ignore as we look at Simon's mother-in-law is the seriousness of the illness. In other words, her diagnosis is not simply man flu or the equivalent, whatever it would have been in the first century.

[ 8 : 27 ] No, in the days before paracetamol fever could kill. One first century writer wrote, What do the sword and tyrants do? They kill.

What does fever do? Nothing less. So then, this is life-threatening. And yet, at a word, she is healed.

And remarkably so. Is it not extraordinary? No convalescence needed. No get-well cards. No chocolates. Nothing like that. She's up and about. Serving immediately.

Jesus came with a message to proclaim. This is how his kingdom will be established. Now, that, of course, is very counter-cultural, isn't it?

Very counter-cultural. Because we live in a culture where words matter less and less. I guess it's reflected most recently in the fact that the emoji movie has now been released.

[ 9 : 29 ] If you're not familiar with emojis, they are cyber symbols, which children of a certain age, I won't tell you what age, just in case I offend people, but children of a certain age use and sort of litter profusely in their text messages.

The world of emojis is one where symbols and pictures have replaced words and text. The implication being that words aren't cool, as one of the characters in the film puts it.

I haven't watched it. I promise I haven't watched it. I read the review. And the temptation, of course, for a church to downplay the importance of Jesus' words and the importance of proclamation in establishing Jesus' kingdom is always with us.

I think it comes across in the phrase that you hear occasionally, preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary. Now, there's something good about that. It makes the point that the lives we live need to be consistent with the message we proclaim.

But there's an awful lot that is very, very wrong with it. Because it massively downplays the importance of words. As if the gospel is somehow better and ideally conveyed by what we do, rather than by what is said.

[ 11 : 03 ] So that's our first point this morning, the proclamation of the kingdom. Secondly, the invasion of the kingdom.

Now, I guess many of us will know this, but the fact is there are far more miracles in the gospel accounts than either in the Old Testament or the rest of the New Testament.

Likewise, there are far more accounts of demon possession. Now, why is that? Well, the answer lies in verse 43 and that little phrase, the kingdom of God.

This is the first time Luke speaks of the kingdom of God. He'll do so another 30 times before his gospel is finished. But what is the kingdom of God? Well, I think one helpful way to think about the kingdom of God is to imagine it like the sun in the sky.

In other words, it is a constant reality. It's always there. God is always king. After all, a kingdom needs a king. God is always king.

[ 12 : 12 ] He's always sovereign over everything. But the fact is there are some days, as many of the days in the last week have been, when actually you can't really see the sun.

On other days, you can. On the days which are cloudy, it's not that the sun has ceased to exist. It's just that the clouds are there obstructing the view.

And what Jesus does in Capernaum, here in Luke chapter 4, if you like, is he rolls the clouds away so that we can clearly see what God's kingdom is like.

In other words, as he preaches the kingdom of God, he also demonstrates the kingdom of God, what life is like in the kingdom of God. So people can see why it is indeed such wonderful news. And so in verses 33 to 35, you see it as this demon is thrown out of the man, as evil is overthrown. It anticipates the final defeat of evil when Jesus died on the cross and anticipates the new creation in heaven where there will be no evil.

[ 13 : 21 ] Likewise, these healing miracles, illness, death, suffering, they're all results of the fall. Mankind's rebellion against God, they are imposters in Jesus' world.

And so in verses 38 to 41, the healing of sickness and the illness, you see, anticipates the new creation where there will be no more sickness or suffering or crying or pain.

You see, what do you think heaven is like? Yes, of course, there's a kind of stereotype of sitting on a cloud, playing a harp, all that kind of stuff. I guess most of us are beyond that.

But I guess, too, don't we still find it really hard to concretely imagine what heaven will be like? Well, look at the Gospels.

They show us what heaven will be like. Just have a look at verse 40. Isn't verse 40 remarkable?

Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him.

[ 14 : 27 ] And he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, you are the son of God. That word all, in verse 40, all the sick, everyone was healed.

In other words, what Jesus did for the one man in the synagogue, what he did for Simon Peter's mother-in-law, that one lady, he now does for everyone.

Quite extraordinary. It is a snapshot of heaven, the new creation. For that brief moment, Capernaum really was heaven on earth.

Picture the scene. No more NHS in crisis. All the big London hospitals empty. No need for doctors, nurses, beds. No evil.

Prisons empty. Suffering has ceased. That is a picture of the new creation of heaven. Of God's kingdom invading.

[ 15 : 28 ] No more suffering, sickness, death, illness, pain. Like a glorious spring day in early March, perhaps. And for that brief moment, you know, the sort of dull, damp, grey London skyline is lifted.

And for that brief moment, you experience warmth. Bright sunshine. You don't have to wear a coat. And then two days later, it starts snowing and raining again, and it's grey.

But actually, you know that summer is coming. It's a certainty. And so, Jesus' kingdom will come. We have a glimpse here in Luke chapter 4.

It will come in all its glory at the end of time when he returns to establish it in full reality. Now, may I say that if you're here this morning and you're looking on the Christian faith, this is the moment, I think, just to stop and to pause.

Because isn't this the world that we all want? I take it that at least part of the reason why Diana, Princess of Wales, has been in the headlines so much again in the last two or three weeks, 20 years on, is because as we see her death, the death of one so tragically young, as we see the shocking results of her death in terms of suffering of family and friends and so on, we long, don't we, for a world where these things don't happen.

[ 17 : 06 ] We ache for a better world. But I guess perhaps for others, it rather begs the question, well, what then about healing today? There are entire Christian ministries which focus on healing, such as this one, this DVD, which in a timely fashion came through the post for me this week, advertising a mission in London with the title in small print at the top, Christ for all nations, and then in very big print, miracles, all the way across there, and then underneath, demonstrations of supernatural power in the name of Jesus.

What do we make of that? Well, Jesus is still alive. He rose from the dead, never to die again. He's still powerful. He can do anything. And yet, of course, Jesus is not physically present today in London in the same way that he was physically present in Capernaum in Luke chapter 4.

And therefore, you see, we await his final return at the end of history when that snapshot, that glimpse in Luke chapter 4, becomes reality everywhere when Jesus returns and his kingdom is fully revealed.

Yes, Jesus can heal, but we are not yet in the new creation. And therefore, of course, it would be entirely wrong to look at the scale of the healings we have here in Luke chapter 4 and elsewhere in the Gospels and expect to see the same thing today.

And healing, therefore, certainly shouldn't shape a ministry or shape the ministry of the local church or be the defining feature of its ministry. Besides, thirdly, Jesus has an even greater priority, the priority of the kingdom.

[ 19 : 00 ] Have a look again at verses 40 to 41. And just imagine the scene, will you? That evening, it must have looked, mustn't it, as if Jesus was on the verge of an enormous popular breakthrough, the momentum unstoppable.

He'd have no trouble packing out the Emirates Stadium. But what happens the next morning? Verse 42, he gets up and he leaves.

When it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him and would have kept him from leaving them. Well, why does he leave?

Verse 43, he says to them, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose. You see, Jesus has a far greater agenda, a far greater priority than the short-term fix, if you like, of one town's social and physical problems.

Notice again, it's completely in line with what we saw last week about Jesus' manifesto. Look back to chapter 4, verse 18, where Jesus says he's been sent to proclaim good news.

[ 20 : 17 ] And those same three words now are here in verse 43. He says, I must preach, the same word as proclaim, the good news, I was sent for this purpose.

Yes, Jesus' ministry has social implications, but he did not come first and foremost to meet social and economic needs. He came above all else to proclaim God's kingdom.

And he neglects here the social and physical needs in Capernaum in order to focus on verbal proclamation of God's kingdom.

Now, to some of us, I guess, that would be a very shocking thing as we see Jesus' priority worked out in practice. On holiday a few weeks ago, we went to an exhibition which contained all the Pulitzer Prize photography winners since the competition began in 1942.

It was fantastic. The exhibition blurb explained, photographers record the defining moments of our world and our time, capturing history through timeless images of fleeting moments.

[ 21 : 38 ] With a click of a button, vivid imagery documents, the pain of poverty, the ecstasy, the victory. And there they were. You know, sort of 70 years of history, if you like, all before us as we looked at the exhibition.

Eddie Adams, the 1969 winner, was quoted, if it makes you laugh, if it makes you cry, if it rips out your heart, that's a good picture. And I guess we all know what he's talking about.

The problem is, of course, that pictures cannot portray man's greatest need. The need for spiritual sight to see God, to understand God.

The need for spiritual ears to hear the gospel. The need for liberty from the judgment to come. The need for God's favor, his forgiveness. The joy of being welcomed into the new creation.

The despair and agony of the alternative. It's why, by the way, I've called this talk the compassionate priority of Jesus.

[ 22 : 41 ] Because once we've understood spiritual reality, not simply the reality which photographs present, which the media and our world around us presents, once we've understood spiritual, once we have spiritual sight to see, then we will grasp why it is this is Jesus' priority and why it is his compassionate priority.

That's how his kingdom advances, through preaching, teaching, proclamation. Well, what are the implications for us?

I've got two implications for us this morning. Firstly, if God sent Jesus to preach, he must want us to listen.

Some of us, I guess, perhaps because of the summer and time out of routine and so on, but some of us will be out of the habit of listening to Jesus' words. Out of the habit of reading the Bible on our own.

Out of the habit, perhaps, of going to growth group. Out of the habit, perhaps, of coming to church regularly on a Sunday. Maybe we aspire to those things, but it never happens because we have never prioritized.

[ 24 : 01 ] Or perhaps, some of us, we know we need to investigate the claims of Jesus, but actually, we never get around to it. But as Jesus shows us here, in order for something to be a priority, we need to say that other things won't be a priority.

So, in order to prioritize reading the Bible in the morning, I have to say that other things the night before, watching telly or just checking my notifications, whatever it is, they're not going to be the priority so that I can get to bed on time.

In order to prioritize church on a Sunday, other things won't be a priority, like going away for the weekend, for example, or staying up too late on Saturday night so we feel exhausted on a Sunday morning.

You see, choices and priorities always go together. If I'm going to choose A and say that's the priority, B is not going to be the priority.

I had a conversation with someone recently, they're not in this room this morning, but they were saying they were far too busy. To which, actually, the answer was they weren't far too busy, it's just they hadn't prioritized.

[ 25 : 12 ] They hadn't said no to things. That's the first implication. If God sent Jesus to preach, he must want us to listen to him. Secondly, if Jesus' priority is preaching and teaching, so should ours be.

It's why the teaching and preaching in the Bible is central to all we do at Grace Church. But the challenge, of course, is for us to keep it that way. Satan would love churches to either ignore or downplay the teaching of the Bible for the simple reason that he knows full well that this is the way in which God's kingdom advances.

It means we have to make choices and priorities as a church. It's why we don't have massive activities going on during the week. We've said no to doing some things in order to focus on the priority things of most importance.

But if preaching and teaching should be our priorities as a church collectively, that should also be our priority as individuals. And I think it's easy to forget about this.

Because who's going to do the teaching? Who's going to lead growth groups? Who will teach Sunday Club? Who will teach in JAM, our youth group? Who will set up the building on a Sunday to facilitate all those things?

[ 26 : 39 ] To facilitate the teaching of the Bible? In other words, if we are going to reflect Jesus' priority here as a church, it's not enough simply to have a minister and a staff team who are committed to teaching the Bible.

We all need to be. Each one of us. It's why there's always a sadness when someone asks us if they can be taken off a rota at church because they're too busy.

Now, of course, there are seasons of life when we may need to do that, but if we're honest, it's often not that we are too busy, it's simply that we are busy doing the wrong things, and we have never made a clear call in terms of our priorities, which, of course, is why it's so fantastic that there are plenty of others here at church who are equally busy, but they are able to serve.

this priority preaching also means that in terms of our evangelism, as we seek to make Jesus known, then our confidence will be in the teaching and preaching of the Bible.

Our guest event, coming up in three weeks' time, which John mentioned earlier, religious extremism, good or bad, what's going to happen? Jesus' words will be taught, the gospel will be proclaimed, because that is where our confidence lies.

[ 27 : 57 ] That is how God advances his kingdom. And finally, of course, it's why our mission partners are all Bible teachers, not doctors, not engineers, not school teachers, but they are all Bible teachers, because it's as God's word is taught that his kingdom advances.

Let's spend a few moments in reflection. I will then lead us in prayer. I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for this compassionate priority, this compassionate purpose of the Lord Jesus as a preacher of good news of your kingdom, the forgiveness of sins.

We praise you for this. little snapshot of Capernaum on that one day as we see what your kingdom is like. Pray for us individually, for as a church corporately, that Jesus' priority would be our priority, and we pray that you'd keep us looking ahead in eager expectation to the full revealing of your kingdom in glory and power at the end of history.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Thank you.