

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the 1990's a phrase became popular among Christians: "What would Jesus do?" And it was often abbreviated "W.W.J.D." Those initials could be found on necklaces, bracelets, t-shirts. It was to be a constant reminder for the Christian to demonstrate the love of Jesus through words and actions.

But really, "What would Jesus do?" is not the foundational question that a Christian should ask. Really the question is, "What did Jesus do... for me?" First and foremost we need to remember that Jesus lived a perfect life and died on the cross for my sins. All this he did not as an example for me, but a substitute for me. He has done what I can never do. Jesus and only Jesus has made me right with God. So because it drew attention to what is secondary instead of what's primary, I never really liked that phrase "WWJD".

But there is a phrase I can get behind, and it's one that we are going to consider over the next several weeks. The phrase we're going to keep coming back to is: "What would Jesus preach?" Isn't that a fascinating question to consider? If Jesus showed up today... if Jesus walked through those doors to the front of our church just when we were finishing up the sermon hymn, and looked over at me and said, "I've got this one, Michael. Join your family. I'll preach for you today." What would Jesus preach? WWJP? What would say to us if he was the one delivering the sermon today? What would he teach us about ourselves, our nature, our works? What would he teach us about himself, and the way that we can get right with God? How can we have peace and joy in our lives? What would Jesus preach?

To answer this question, in the next six weeks, we will look at what Jesus actually did preach. To be honest, to really fully cover this topic we would need to do a survey of the Gospels, because Jesus' preaching and teaching fills the Gospels. But instead we're going to focus our attention in the coming weeks on portions Matthew's Gospel, chapters 5, 6, and 7. In those chapters we have recorded for us Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus is preaching to a large crowd of people. He touches on many topics, all of which are relevant to our lives today. Jesus is going to give us insight into our inner being, insight into God's way of viewing the world, insight into the relationship between God and man, and much more. I hope you will be able to attend all 6 weekends as we cover this, because by the end, you will know definitively, "What would Jesus preach?"

By the way, would try to prepare by reading the Sermon on the Mount several times? Again, that's Matthew 5,6,7. Three chapters. There's so much in there that I would like you to read it several times per week over the next several weeks and become extremely familiar with that content. I think sometimes people are afraid to read the Bible because it's so big and not all of it is easy to understand, and so they don't even start. I think others do try to read their Bibles, but they try to read the whole Bible in a year, sometimes less. That's like trying to swallow a 10 oz filet mignon in one swallow. What a waste of delicious steak if you would slam it down in 2 minutes, right? So I want you to savor the three chapters that are Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I want all of you to become experts on it in the next 6 weeks. You have a month and a half to master these three chapters of the Bible: Matthew 5,6,7. So by the time the month of March

begins, I want everyone to be able to definitively answer the question: “What would Jesus preach?”

Now, today is a bit more introductory. To get things rolling, we’re going to look at the very beginning of Jesus’ preaching ministry. Today we will look at the chapter immediately preceding Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and next week we’ll start looking at that sermon. In Matthew chapter 4, we get a general answer to the question, “What would Jesus preach” and then in chapters 5,6,7, we get specific examples Jesus’ preaching.

So, we turn our attention to Matthew 4, starting at verse 12.

Matthew 4:12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.

Last week we talked about the baptism of Jesus. We talked about how his baptism really marked the beginning of his public ministry. It was in a sense his inauguration. It was his anointing. He was set apart for service to God as the Savior of the world.

Immediately after Jesus’ baptism, he was led into the desert where for almost a month and a half he fasted in the wilderness and was tempted by Satan. The temptations were grueling, yet Jesus did not give in. He remained sinless.

Then we pick it up here:

Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

Now look at the general area where Jesus chose to preach and teach. And look at this general area from which he called his first disciples. He chose to conduct much of his ministry in Galilee. Galilee, before Roman rule, was known as the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the tribes that had settled there. It wasn’t exactly the best place to live, and so it’s called the land of darkness. There are two main reasons for this. First, whenever a foreign army invaded Israel, they came through Galilee because it was the easiest passage way. The people there were doormats for whatever enemy Israel had at the time... and they had many. The second reason and more important reason this was the land of darkness was that with each invasion, the invading always left behind stragglers and squatters. Over the years, lots of foreigners, non-Jews, came to live in this area. In addition to the Jews there were Arabs, Phoenicians, Egyptians and others. And with their foreign culture they brought foreign (and false) gods. So far to the north of the Jewish religious center, Jerusalem, was this land of Zebulun and Naphtali... also called Galilee of the Gentiles (non Jews). Matthew quotes a prophecy from Isaiah, which we read in our Scripture lesson this morning. This land of frequent fighting with foreign armies, and this land of spiritual darkness would see a great light. Isaiah predicted how Jesus would conduct much of his ministry in Galilee. Matthew records for us how that prophecy came true.

So before we go on, take note. We’re answering the question, “What did Jesus preach?” Part of the answer is to pay attention WHERE Jesus preached. Among whom did Jesus preach? Where did he call his first disciples? Not in the temple in Jerusalem. Not among the “religious” people and Bible scholars. We might have picked such a location. We might have sought out the influential people... especially those who had the most influence in the religious sphere. But not Jesus. Jesus does the opposite of what you would expect. In the land of Gentiles... in the land of spiritual darkness... in that place where the fewest people knew God, there he calls his own out of darkness into his light.

So in answering the question, “What would Jesus preach” if he were here on earth today, first consider where he would preach and to whom he would preach. Jesus would seek out those who are not churched. Jesus would try to preach to those who are living in darkness... those who are most hopeless... those whose lives are most messed up... those who don’t know the way to God. Jesus would seek them out and be for them the light.

If we are faithful followers of Jesus, won’t we do the same? How can we as individuals bring the light of Jesus Christ to this dark world? Don’t we have to where it is darkest? So let me ask you... who do you know that is especially in the dark when it comes to knowing God and the salvation he gives away in Christ Jesus his Son? How can you lead them into the light of God’s Word? Will you invite them to church? Will you invite them into your home? Will you invite me to meet them somehow? Will you boldly witness about Jesus Christ when the opportunities arise? Jesus was light shining in the darkness. We, his followers, are called to reflect his light to this world of darkness.

Now we get to the heart of the matter:

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

We could pause there, but I want to read the rest of this reading as it talks about the calling of Jesus’ first disciples, and then it speaks again of what Jesus preached about. We’re not going to focus on the calling of Jesus’ disciples today, but let me go ahead and read to the end of this section:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

What would Jesus preach? He calls people. He calls by saying, “Come, follow me!” I think we sometimes make it harder for people to become Christians than Jesus ever did. What does it mean to be a Christian? Some would say that you have to know and believe a certain body of **doctrine**. Once you have been taught the essentials of the Christian faith, you are a Christian. Others would say that you have to follow and perform certain **rites**. As long as you do the right things in church in the right way, and follow the right rites, then you’ll be a Christian. Others would say it’s about **membership**. As long as you are a member of the right church, then you are a Christian. Some would say it’s about doing enough **good things**. If you help enough people, show enough love, then you are a Christian.

While all of these are related to being a Christian in some ways, none of these are the essence of being a Christian. So what is the essence? Being a Christian simply means that you are a follower of Christ. When did Peter, Andrew, James and John become Christians? It was the day Jesus invited them to follow him... and they did! The moment they started following Jesus, their doctrine was still quite weak... they knew very little about Jesus and his teachings. Right? They were not yet performing any rites. They were not members of any church. And they weren’t yet doing good deeds prescribed by Jesus. They had none of this. What they did have is that they were following Jesus.

Another example would be the criminal on the cross that was dying next to Jesus. By all appearances, this man did not know Jesus prior to being nailed to a cross next to Jesus. Yet in that brief time together, that criminal came to trust in Jesus. He asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. What did Jesus answer? "I'm sorry, but first I have to attend 20 classes so you know all the doctrines." Or, "Okay, but there are rites and rituals you will need to keep first." Or, okay, but we need to get you on the disciple membership roster first. Or, okay, but first there a number of good works you will need to perform, because you don't deserve to enter into my kingdom yet. No! To all of these, Jesus simply said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." At that very moment, that man became a follower of Jesus. He had done nothing good. He had little knowledge. But he trusted his life to Jesus. He became a Jesus follower, and Jesus said that he would be in heaven when he died a short time later.

So with that in mind, What did Jesus preach? Today we see in a general way what he preached. Starting next week we'll see specifically how he preached. Here is the summary from our text:

Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." And at the end of the reading it says, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

The essence of Jesus preaching had two parts: A call to repentance, and good news of the kingdom of heaven.

The call to repentance is a call to first of all recognize sin in our lives. We are inclined to be blind to our sin. We simply don't see it sometimes. Sometimes we do see it, but we rationalize it or minimize. Sometimes we try to blame others for what we have done. But what we don't want to do, and what we go to great lengths to avoid, is to admit that we have sinned, that our sins are disgusting and offensive to God, and that we deserve eternal condemnation because of them. We convince ourselves that we are not sinners, but mistakers. Have I made mistakes? Sure... all of us are willing to admit we have made mistakes... as long as we don't get too specific. But sinners... that's another matter entirely. Admitting that we have are rebels, disobedient to God, dirty in his sight and deserving of hellfire. That's something we will not admit easily.

So Jesus, when he preached, preached about the need for repentance. To acknowledge sin and it's horrible consequences. But he also preached the good news of the kingdom. The solution for sin is Jesus. Turn from your wickedness and follow Jesus. Why Jesus? Because he is the one that lived for you, died for you and rose on the third day. Jesus is your Savior and your substitute. With him you have forgiveness of all your sin. You have life... life now and life that never ends. With him you are rescued from certain destruction and you are given an eternal connection to your creator. Jesus preached: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near... and the good news of the kingdom.

When Jesus preaches to us over the next few weeks, he's going to get more specific. There will be some uncomfortable moments. He will force us to admit our disobedience to God. He'll shine a bright light on places we would prefer to leave in the dark and hidden. He does this because he loves us. If we insist on clinging to our sin and remaining in darkness, we will have no part in the kingdom of heaven. We will get to keep our sins, and die separate from our holy God now and forever.

But as he leads us to confess our sins, Jesus will preach to us the good news of the kingdom of heaven. Entrance into his kingdom does not depend on who we are and what we've done... or even on the extent of our theological knowledge. The only consideration is this: Are you following Jesus? Are you listening to his voice? Are you growing in your relationship with him? Do you follow him knowing he has the words of eternal life? And that he is the way, the truth and the life? Do you follow him because you know his perfect sacrifice for sin means your guilt is gone, your debt is paid for? More than that, you are not a stranger to God. You are not a slave of God. You are a dearly beloved child of God? Following Jesus, don't you want to know him better, follow him closer, draw the attention of others to him, and proclaim to others what has been made known to you? Don't you want others to follow him?

I look forward to the next few weeks as we listen to Jesus preach. His preaching will fundamentally change you. What would Jesus preach? Come and listen. Amen.