

“The Folly of Following” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Epiphany 3 January 22, 2023

- I. **Matthew 4:17** - ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- II. **Electricity is a mystery for most people.**
 - a. Plug in something to an outlet and the power is there.
 - b. Start your car and the engine turns over (most of the time).
 - c. How many of you know that Oregon is a pioneer in electrical power?
 - i. I read somewhere that the first commercial application of hydroelectric power came out of the Willamette Falls power station in the late 1800’s – sending power to Portland street lights from Oregon City
 - ii. Can you imagine the crowds gathering around the first electric-powered street lights – and perhaps the hope that life might change for the better?
 - d. Dallas Willard wrote about his own childhood growing up in southern Missouri where electricity was only available for lights.
 - i. He said during his senior year of high school, the electric company extended its wiring to rural farms.
 - ii. He then says, “When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life—daylight and dark, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it—could then be vastly changed for the better.”
 - iii. Some people chose to stay with their kerosene lamps and lanterns, their iceboxes and cellars for storage, their scrub boards for laundry and rug beaters for cleaning, their pedal-powered sewing machines and their radios with batteries.¹
 - iv. It was not a given that people saw the value in electric power – but no matter what people thought about it, a new kind of world was opened.
 - e. In a similar way, Jesus came to introduce a new reign or rule, a new power that transforms the lives of His followers.
- III. **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... is near...**
 - a. As my seminary professor Jeff Gibbs translates it, “Repent! For the reign [or rule] of heaven stands near.” ²
 - i. Consider this for a moment... it is the first thing Jesus says to begin His ministry on earth... repent!
 - ii. Jesus says what John the Baptist said as the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus to begin His ministry... Repent! For the reign of heaven stands near... Matthew 3:2

1. Remember, John the Baptist was not just saying to those people, “you need to stop sinning,” he was saying those people had wandered outside of God’s will and plan so far, they needed to come back to God altogether in faith.
- iii. Jesus also says, “Repent...stop walking in unbelief and sin – be converted and believe in the Savior, the presence of God on earth!”
- b. Jesus is the light that came into the darkness of the world, and conversion – or faith in Him – is the only way to experience His reign now..... and forever.
- c. The beginning of the light in the land of darkness is the call to faith... which naturally includes repentance and turning away from sin.

IV. **Repent! For the reign of heaven stands near.**

- a. A key problem with all of us as sinful human beings is following the world and its designs and plans.
- b. A lot of it has to do with pride and ego as we think we know better, and we can go our own way and make our own plans.
- c. Strangely, we SAY we believe in Jesus and His Word, but we don’t use Him in any meaningful way to guide our faith and lives.
- d. Michele and I were talking about this the other night, as people we know tell us they have “researched” something and then made life decisions – even in matters of faith.
 - i. The problem is that the research they did was listening to worldly advice on YouTube or other media platforms.
 - ii. A person who says they are Christian but doesn’t consult the Bible, doesn’t pray, doesn’t really believe God’s Word... doesn’t even know much about the Word of God... is set up perfectly to follow the world.
 - iii. The world I’m talking about is everything that puts obstacles in the way of loving God and our neighbor... by His standards.
 1. I’m not talking about the world’s definition of love – which is often to love someone in their sinful behavior and even encourage them in it...
 2. The world cannot see the Word of God as a valid option for faith and life – it cannot see Jesus as God and the salvation we all need – because it sees all the Bible and the cross as folly. (1 Corinthians 1:18)
- e. So, when we follow the world, we are not following Jesus.
 - i. 1 John 2:15-17 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

- ii. Just as the Small Catechism tells us about the 3rd petition of the Lord's Prayer – "Thy will be done" - We ask that God, in keeping with His will, would never allow Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh to take God's name and faith from us.
- f. It is great foolishness to follow the world and its desires – because we will consistently walk away from our faith – God's will – and our Savior Jesus!
- g. Just stop for a moment and consider the ways we fall for the world's views -
 - i. Is life precious from the moment of conception until a natural death or is it up to us to figure out when someone should die? Whether they are in the womb, or suffering from a disease, or elderly?
 - ii. Is marriage God's design, or is it up to us to decide that we can do without it and just live together? To tell God what marriage is?
 - iii. Is my sinful behavior a matter of personal choice and no one gets to show me where I'm wrong?
 - iv. Is there some absolute truth that we can always return to, or is it all just relative and my truth is one thing and your truth is another?
- h. I'm not encouraging you to go out and see if people believe these things – I'm encouraging you to see if you are letting the world's views skew your call to follow Jesus and the will of God.
- i. Yes, for many people in the world around us, it is absolute foolishness to follow Jesus and the Bible – but that is exactly what we are called to do!

V. **Jesus, our Light, calls us to follow Him out of the world's darkness.**

- a. In our Gospel lesson, He goes all around the area that was darkness... destroyed and overrun for centuries because of the people rejecting God – and He says, "Repent! For the reign of heaven stands near."
- b. The next order of business was to call followers – and they come from ordinary people – but will be called into extraordinary things.
 - i. In fact, by the world's standards, these men were fools – following a dead Man as He riled up the religious leaders and Roman government – challenging Satan... the world... and our sinful flesh.
- c. Yes, it cost Jesus His very life – the foolishness of the cross – as He died a criminal's death.
 - i. And yet, out of that foolishness of God, the world is no longer the end – death no longer holds power over us – and through our faith in Christ, we are empowered to repent, believe, and follow.
- d. The call of Christ in our lives elicits a response – we can keep seeking the ways of the world, or through faith seek the ways of God and His will.
- e. It isn't always perfectly clear how to follow Christ, but our lives after we come to faith are transformed even more than those who experienced the new power of electricity.
- f. We have been given a new life and a new way to live that is folly by the world's standards... and the wisdom of God by His standards.

g. God grant us all a willingness to follow Him in faith. Amen.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 30-31

² Gibbs, J. A. (2006). *Matthew 1:1–11:1* (p. 213). Concordia Publishing House.