

Matthew 13:53-14:12

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[0:00] When you're old like me. Things from the past sort of, you know, come to mind. And I remember, you know, decades ago, singing, you know, Charles Wesley hymns.

And Charles Wesley knew something about the Holy Spirit, right? You know, he was used greatly of God. And the words of a hymn, just I want to use them as a prayer as we start.

You know, back in the 1800s, they used the word Holy Ghost for Holy Spirit. If you're new to these things, you know, again, what's going on? You know, it made sense then. I'm going to use it still.

And just, you know, use the words of this hymn as a prayer as we begin.

Come Holy Ghost, for moved by thee the prophets wrote and spoke. Unlock the truth, thyself the key, and seal the sacred book.

Expand thy wings, celestial dove, brood o'er our nature's night. And on our disordered spirits move. And let there now be light. Amen.

[1:05] Well, if you are new to Cornerstone and you're here for the first time, then we're working our way through Matthew's gospel. But sometimes when we're sort of working through a gospel, it can feel that we can end up feeling a little bit lost.

You know, I can't see the wood for the trees. As we sit in these passages, we can lose a sense of kind of Christ's purpose in coming. Now, the prophets foreseeing the day when Jesus the Messiah would come, spoke and pictured it in so many wonderful ways.

Not least Isaiah, often called the fifth gospel writer. In Isaiah 61 verse 3, and I think it may have been mentioned in community groups in the last few weeks, he said this, Jesus himself would apply these very words from Isaiah 61 to himself in Luke chapter 4, didn't he?

And so we can be assured that as we read these passages, we read the gospels, the truth of what Isaiah foresaw is what Jesus is coming to do in these passages and in the gospels, that he's come to bring beauty instead of ashes.

His beautifying work in our lives brings his kingdom power and transformation. Remaining in ashes then is to remain under the dominion of darkness, under Satan's rule and the ugly effects of sin.

[2:47] But Christ has come to bring beauty, the beauty of the kingdom, kingdom life, a life enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit that he gladly gives to us.

And I want to run that idea, that theme of beauty and ashes as we walk through the passage today. And again, as we read through the gospels, if some of you, you know, quite often on a Sunday morning, we've got folks who are new to looking into Christianity, never been to church before, and kind of looking into stuff.

And you look at passages like this and it can be a little bit hard to grasp at first, but hopefully helping, understanding the big picture of what Christ is trying to do helps grasp what actually is happening in these passages.

And we know that there is power in these gospels, there's power in these passages, because you look back and you can see just how the direction of world history was changed by these words, by the life, the teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and by those who received its beauty instead of ashes.

But not just then, not just then, but here and now today, Christ has come to bring this into your life and mine.

[4:08] And beauty instead of ashes. That as we surrender our lives to him, as we open our hearts wide to him, we're experiencing the transforming power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

So as we gather this morning, gather with a sense of expectation, open your hearts wide to the Lord himself as he speaks to us. But there is a bit of a head spin in this passage, and for the folks that

Matthew originally was writing to, which was principally a Jewish audience.

And it was this, how could the long promised Messiah, the king, end up dead on a cross? Was he really the one then who was to come, the long promised Messiah, promised by Isaiah and others? What kind of beauty or salvation or rescue could that bring? And of course, the gospels, and Matthew is really keen to explain what is going on.

And Matthew captures something of his purpose in his writing when he captures John the Baptist's question to Jesus through his own disciples in chapter 11, verse 3, when he says, are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?

[5:32] That is a sort of central question that Matthew is wanting to answer. And that's useful because maybe you're looking into Christianity, like I was saying, for the first time, and you have a similar question.

Is Jesus really the one? And could he really be the one? How could this life impact the history of the world? And can it really have power to change my life too?

Is he really the one who was to come, or should I look for somebody else? And also what we find in this passage in Matthew's gospel is also a bit of a sea change, a shifting tide in public opinion at the time about Jesus.

Up until now, for the most part, people are amazed by Jesus, and we'll see some of that today. Fabulous teaching on the mind, chapters 5 to 7.

Incredible miracles in chapters 8 and 9. Brilliant teaching in the parables that we've been looking at in the last few weeks of the kingdom in chapter 13. But here we come to verse 53, and we sense that sea change.

[6:40] When Jesus had finished these parables, there's a changing section, Matthew's sort of noting. He moved on from there, and we are also moving on to a new section in the story.

I've given it this pissy title because I really couldn't think of anything better. I apologize, not that imaginative, but we see here the responses to God's Messiah, his messengers, and his message. And in sort of addressing that, Matthew paints two scenes for us, doesn't he? One is in the countryside and in the villages, and the other is in the city. One is among the poor folk, and the other is among the palace folk, the people in power.

And what we find in verse 54, that this, as he enters into this country scene, it's actually a homecoming scene. He's back in Nazareth. And if you are like me, and have watched the Nativity film many, many times every Christmas, with family, with kids, whenever the word Nazareth is mentioned, it immediately triggers, like Pavlov's dog, the song, things are really cool in Nazareth. No, no, no, no. If you've not been cursed with that, well, bless you, but if you have, I feel your pain. Anyway, we are in Nazareth, but not Nativity, and so on.

[7:56] We are 30 years on from that. But it is his hometown, where verse 55, his mother, his brothers, and his sisters are, we are told.

Verse 54, maybe the first Sabbath back, he's speaking in the synagogue. And folks are pretty impressed. Wow, they're amazed.

And no wonder, rightly so. I mean, here, here come among them is the truest and most perfect and anointed prophet, priest, and king Israel has ever known.

Greater than the great magisterial prophets, Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel, who in their time spoke forth God's word with incredible power and effect, but he is greater than they.

Greater than the greatest of the priestly lines, whether it's Aaron or Samuel or Ezra, who led the people to God with great power and effect, but here is one who is greater than they. Here amongst them is the truest of Israel's kings, greater than King David himself, who led them with such effect, and yet he is greater than them.

[9:00] Here he is before them, in every sense, the true Son of God. And he sets before them the beauties of the kingdom. Light and life itself is laid before them.

And so rightly, verse 54, they are amazed. But of course, all that divine splendor and glory that he possesses is for the moment veiled in flesh.

And incredibly, what we see, like their ancestors before, they take verse 57, offense at him, offense at the word of God, the way of God, the messenger of God, their hearts are hardened, choosing ashes rather than beauty.

And this turning point, I think Matthew is wanting to convey, is not unexpected or outwith the way that God works.

The Old Testament is full of saviors, small s if you like, that God uses, who likewise are rejected, and yet God uses that very rejection to achieve his great and wonderful and mighty purposes. [10:14] You think of Joseph as this sort of obvious example that comes to mind. The brothers, they take offense at him, they reject him, they even try to kill him, and yet God is able to work and he ends up being their savior, like small s.

They too reject the stone that the Lord has raised up, but then he becomes the capstone or cornerstone of their salvation.

And so Joseph, reflecting on that, and if you're not familiar with the verse, it's worth memorizing, Genesis 50 verse 20, says to them at the end of it, what you intended for evil, actually God intended for good.

God is able to turn around the bleakest of circumstances for his glory and our good, as we were singing earlier on. But back to the passage.

What are we to take from this hardening of heart and this offense that they take? Are we just kind of to stand back and observe the kind of the first fruit of the rejection of this Messiah that will increase and will lead to the cross?

[11:26] Well, no. I think there's more going on. It is that, but there's much more. And firstly, I think what we're to draw from it is this, that hearts, our hearts, can be hardened to the beautifying work of the kingdom because of such things as, well, for example here, familiarity.

Familiarity. Verse 54, they are amazed, but then they ask the question, where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers, they asked.

Isn't this a carpenter's son? Isn't this mother, isn't his mother's name Mary and there aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?

Where then did this man get all these things? It's like they're spiritually blind to what is right there in front of them, blinded in this case by familiarity.

This is, you know, back in the day, you know, we say, you know, for example, you know, Kenneth McKenzie. Kenneth McKenzie means Kenneth, son of Kenneth. In those days, Ben was replaced, was a replacement for the word Mac.

[12:41] So, you know, isn't this Jesus, Ben Joseph? Jesus, son of Joseph, the carpenter. They are rendered unable to open their hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit who opens blind eyes because of, amongst other things, familiarity.

And of course, this can still be the case. It will be this similar, but the number of folks over the years, maybe you've met who were brought up, for example, going to a Christian, you know, Church of England school or something like that or heard the stories at Sunday school or even were brought up in a Christian home and it's also familiar to them.

They know the stories, quite amazed by them at times. And yet, still, it hasn't really sunk beyond a head knowledge. It never really plumbed the depths of their hearts.

People who managed to kind of bluff their way through church and camps enjoying the community of Christ, but not the Christ of the community and His saving power. And when it bumps gums with the way that they want to live their lives, sometimes they can end up taking real offense at the faith. And your families can be one of the hardest places to be a witness if we come from a non-Christian home. I've told you maybe this story before, but a friend of mine back in the 80s, that's the 1980s, not the 1880s, in case some of you are wondering, her family didn't go to church.

[14:10] They were atheistic, but she started going to church as a teenager. She came home one night excited from coming back from the evening service, having committed her life to Christ.

Full of joy, full of excitement, she shared it with her parents. Her father stood up and slapped her in the face. Now, he mellowed over the years.

He even asked me to take his funeral, which I did, but that was hard for her. Over the years, even though they didn't receive her Christ, she continued to love them well and present beauty to them. And whilst they did not receive her Christ, they mellowed to her Christianity. On a recent trip to Asia at the Bible school I was teaching in, I'm always really keen to hear testimonies from the students there.

One of the folks who spoke, he was a bit older than the others in the group, and as he spoke and shared his testimony, he would often stop, just choked up with tears.

[15:23] He came from a very rural area, spoke of how he came to Christ, but how his family and actually the rest of the village utterly rejected him.

They would block the well that he had dug for his cattle. They would block the roads to his fields. They told him he was a curse on the village because he did not follow their gods. Their hearts were hard, their eyes were blind to seeing the beautifying effect of the gospel that was right before them in his life, choosing ashes instead. He received so much abuse, he was broken. But in the mercy of God, here he was in the Bible school and he found a safe haven, a place to heal, a place to hear more about the Savior that he had come to trust in. Family hometown can be the hardest to witness to.

There's only so many times you feel that you can bring up the Christian faith. And I've said, and it's been true in my own experience, that I prayed that God would raise up other folks who would share the beauty of the gospel with family members as well as myself.

[16:38] And God has graciously answered that over the years. Now, though this is sort of occurring in Jesus' time, I think in our own time there's a number of things going on.

And one of those things is that there is a time of favor for the gospel amongst some. And there's an openness to hearing about it. I don't think we know how long this window will be open, but it does appear that younger generations are searching for truth, for a better story, and Christ offers that, doesn't he?

He really does. Not everyone is open to it, not every generation is open up, but there is many. And so, we need to kind of have a sense of confidence in sharing, in knowing that there are people who are seeking.

And we're going to share, I'm going to keep it for the central prayer meeting, some of the things that I think God is doing among us. So we share these good stories and we can pray and praise God for them.

You hear about them there. And actually, sometimes, as was in the case of my own family members, that though they can be hard, actually they do eventually come to follow Christ after you.

[17:53] Maybe after many decades, after many prayers, they mellow and they start seeking. But back to the passage.

It's not surprising then that with all of this kind of offense going on, Jesus quotes what was probably a popular proverb in verse 57 and certainly was true. It was seen in the lives of the other, those who came to be faithful messengers for the Lord.

Jeremiah, for example, Jeremiah chapter 11 tells us of how the men of his hometown of Anathoth plotted against him. And in chapter 12, verse 6, even his own family were against him.

His own town, his own family, they were blinded by maybe familiarity, closed their hearts off to the beauty of the Lord and chose ashes. And so, verse 58, he did not do many miracles, not because he could not, but rather because he would not.

And as believers, it's key, isn't it, that we don't close or harden our hearts to the beautifying power of Christ's kingdom work in our lives.

[19:04] And in areas of our lives, choose ashes, darkness's dominion, sin's seductiveness, Satan's lies. That familiarity that we can have with these things can sometimes blunt its effect, closes us off in our hearts to the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

But rather, as we draw and as we sit before these passages, the Holy Spirit is just kind of nudging us and saying, yeah, open up your heart to the work of Christ in your life.

Let Christ and his kingdom remain vivid in terms of your relationship with him and in your hearts.

Because that's the thing that actually will keep our own personal fellowship sweet with him.

But it will keep our fellowship sweet, his work in us and through us alive when faith is not stifled by familiarity. John Stott speaks into this.

He says, Christian fellowship is sweetest when it is centered around the Lord and he and his work savor the conversation. Christian worship is fuller when the people singing believe the words they are singing.

[20:17] Christian discipleship is deeper when there is a conviction that it is true and worth committing to. Christian service and ministry is done best and without complaint when it is utterly believed that God is in it all and pleased with it.

And our evangelism is most successful when people can see, hear, and sense in us that we believe and live and enjoy the reality we speak of and then he finishes by saying, in a church where there is a lack of faith that this testimony is true, Jesus could not do many miracles there.

Familiarity can stem then or lead to a lack of faith stemming the beautifying work of the gospel. And that beautifying work can be very painful, can't it?

As we are humbled, as we are pruned for a season. And that might be part of why we resist it. But when we do, then we are choosing ashes, not the beautifying work of the gospel, trusting him in it all.

So where is the Holy Spirit nudging that in our own lives? And if you are thinking of other people, I hope they are thinking about it. Stop that nonsense. We think about ourselves.

[21 : 36] Familiarity, stemming faith, unbelieving family, a bit hardened. Lean into, and we were struggling because of that. Lean into Jesus, who knows exactly what you are going through.

So familiarity, what else is here when it comes to responses to the Messiah, his message, and his messengers? Well, we shift, don't we, from the countryside to the kings and to chapter 14.

Herod, the king, is not the same Herod at the beginning of the gospel. This is one of his four sons who are still living. He is described as a tetrarch. It's Greek, two words, arche, which means king, tetra, four.

So he's literally one of four rulers. And he is responsible for the northern part of his father's former kingdom in the Galilee area. And from Herod's response in verse 1, about the reports about Jesus, verse 2 makes it clear that John's ministry and his encounter with John the Baptist had left a significant impression on him.

Mark, in his gospel, tells us that Herod, though puzzled by John the Baptist, liked to go and listen to him. It's as though the spirit had been contending with his soul.

[22 : 56] Beauty was pressing in. And so it's no surprise then that when Herod hears reports, about Jesus, he assumes a kind of a link to John, maybe some ghostly apparition, superstition, is mixed maybe with a troubled conscience.

So when he did actually meet Jesus and he did actually meet him, Luke tells us he was really glad to meet him because he wanted a sign, a miracle.

the savior of his soul stood before him, but he looked just simply for a spectacle for his satisfaction. The beauty of the kingdom was right there, and yet he chose ashes.

So Matthew sort of flicks to a flashback about Herod and John's connection that kind of explains why Herod might have thought that. The Roman historian Josephus gives us more details on Herod and his relationship.

Herod had met Herodias whilst on a trip to see his brother Philip in Rome. Herod and Herodias, they had this illicit liaison, and they promised to each other that they would divorce their spouses.

[24 : 19] Herod's wife was the daughter of King Aretas IV of nearby Napatea, which is just a little, there's a real history lesson going on here. I'm just giving you a sort of mental break from the passage just to have a wee, but I thought it was interesting.

And Herod's original wife went back to her father, who three years after the death of Jesus deployed his army against Herod and Herod's army was completely destroyed.

History lesson over. But Herod, like his father, though he was king, was not the true king of Israel. He did not follow the ways of the God of Israel.

And John was absolutely right, wasn't he, to tell him that it was not lawful for him to be married to Herodias in the way that it came about. Leviticus 18.16 and 20.21 make that clear.

And, you know, Herod normally, because of the kind of character that we know that he was ordinarily, would have had no qualms about silencing that voice and killing John, removing this troublesome prophet and his inconvenient truths that he proclaimed.

[25 : 35] But we discover in verse 5 of chapter 14 that he was afraid of the uprising that might come because John was really appreciated as a prophet amongst the people.

And in this flashback, Matthew puts before us four characters. First of all, John the Baptist himself, who is portrayed as this faithful character who knew the beauties of the kingdom.

They were impacting his own soul and he wanted others to know about it and to follow it also. John is presented that he is the faithful man of God who was not afraid to speak the truth to prince or king or country folk.

He did not just preach eloquent truths to titivate the masses but brought the application right up close and personal. He said in Luke chapter 3, you soldiers, you truly want to repent and stop exhorting folks.

You religious hypocrites, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. You soldiers, don't make false allegations. Be content with your pay and so on. Find life, he proclaimed.

[26:38] The other side of that 360 degree turn that's required from the direction that you're going to turn around to find the Lord, the living God and his kingdom and beautifying work in your life, that repentance that you're called to.

He preached truth to the people in power. Faithfulness to his master was of greater concern to him than the flattery and fortunes of political favor.

He understood clearly that he only ever needed to be concerned about being in the audience of one. But he knew, and the scriptures are clear, that faithfulness at times, and we've seen many believers around the world across the generations know this, can come.

Faithfulness to Christ, faithfulness to the gospel, faithfulness to our God can come at a huge cost. gift. He pays the ultimate price. But we can remain faithful to him because we follow the one who is constantly faithful to us.

And John, as faithful to the gospel, prefigures Jesus' own fate that will come. Let's slow the pace, pause and ask, well, where is my faithfulness to the faithful one tempted to falter at this time?

[28:02] What are the particular pressures that make me go mute when it comes to living and speaking wisely, kingdom truths and values?

Whether it's in our flat, our halls of residence, in our homes, in our kids, at school, it's in our tutorials, with our wider family, in the sports team and so on, in our workplaces.

And as we go mute, we don't give folks the opportunity to receive beauty instead of ashes. What would my next step in faithfulness look like in those places that maybe the Lord has just nudged you with?

That I might be faithful to the faithful one. But there are other characters here. There's Herod. Eric Alexander, in his usual manner, described the dynamics at play in him as the destructive power of a weak will.

If John was faithful, Herod, as we see in these verses, was fearful of what the people would think. Though Herod was a king over a kingdom, even over the historical people of God, this king was made of very different stuff from the true king of God's people who was walking elsewhere amongst them at that time.

[29:19] Herod's rule was ashen. His will and his moral compass feeding his own selfish ends rather than the selfless, self-sacrificial act that we will see of the true king of kings.

Herod's own father was notorious. He slaughtered the innocent of Bethlehem. He arranged the accidental death of family members, even his own children. It was heard about in Rome, Caesar commented that he would rather be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons.

Safer life for them in kosher Israel than his poor offspring, of whom Herod, this Herod, was one. And in verses six and seven, what we see is a kind of drink-fueled, bravado-filled, rash promises made as he lingered over the dancing form of his stepdaughter.

In Mark's account that he speaks of in this incident, and Josephus gives us a name for Herod's stepdaughter, Salome.

He has Herod offering Salome up to half the kingdom. Some commentators have said that when she asked for John's head, he just needed to say, well, that's not in the half that I was offering you.

[30:39] But obviously, he didn't think of that at the time. Herod's ashen heart informs and forms his fears in the wrong order. He feared man more than he feared God.

He feared losing face before the people. He feared losing political power and influence in front of his military personnel gathered there with him. His misdirected loves and fears left his soul devoid of the beautified life John and Christ were offering to him.

had he known the effect of it, he would have known that promises that should never have been made should never be kept.

Had it been so that he had received the beautifying effect, his heart would not be so hard and his will so weak to allow such a travesty. But he was offered beauty, but he chose ashes.

And again, let's pause and let's think. Where is my will weakened by wrong fears? More likely to give into temptation.

[31:51] And for some of us, like Herod, some of us need to think through practically what, for example, what role does the overconsumption of alcohol have in the weakening or uninhibiting and the uninhibiting of our will, our conscience, resistance to sin and to temptation.

Friends, this passage reminds us beauty is available. So there's the faithful Herod, the faithful John, the fearful Herod, and then there's Herodias, who's fostering a grudge, isn't she?

Mark tells us that in his account. Her resentment of John and his ministry simmered away on the back burner. And such things left unchecked, they poison the soul, they harden the heart, they warp the will, they sear the conscience, they hollow the heart, they rev up revenge.

And when opportunity comes knocking, that simmering heat gets turned on full, doesn't it? And when Salome comes to her, verse 8, she says, get me the head of John the Baptist on a platter. She too, with the presence of John nearby, was offered beauty. But she chose ashes. Where has fostering a grudge, despising or hatred been simmering in our hearts?

[33:17] In the end, it will consume us. Bring it to the Lord. Bring it to the cross. Bring the word to it, and let the truth and the spirit of Christ transform it and bring to that area beauty, not ashes.

it. And then Salome, the victim to her family's folly. A stupid oath, a fear-filled act, a fostered grudge led to a child when looking for parental guidance gets caught up in their parental ashen folly.

Had John, for example, gone to his mother, Elizabeth, she would have spoken beauty into his soul. Words that bring life. Salome's mother speaks death into hers.

What permanent influence do we want to have on the life of those God has placed around about us? How can we be speaking life and truth and the beauty of the gospel people into our own and their lives?

Life in and through Christ, who offers not just temporal, but also an eternal hope to us, who will receive it. Sparing us from sin's fruit and folly, but rather bringing us the Spirit's fruit.

[34:49] Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, and self control, the beautifying fruit of the Spirit given to those who have come to know God's Messiah, his message, and become his messengers.

Nazareth could have received beauty but chose the ashes of offense and unbelief. Herod's court chose the ashes of power, bravado, face-saving pride, resentment, and rash bouts.

And John models the costly beauty of faithfulness. The question was, was he the one who was to come?

Who could bring the beauty instead of ashes? The gospel's resigning answer is yes, yes, he is the one who was to come. And that same Messiah who was rejected still offers life.

The same faithful Lord still calls people to follow him in faith even when it costs because he offers true, present, and eternal beauty instead of ashes.

[36:03] So as we sing this next powerful song that charts, in a sense, the journey from ash to the beauty of the gospel, we were able to declare, hallelujah, all I have is Christ.

Jesus is my life. let's pause and ask and plead with the Lord, please, let the beauty of your kingdom, your rule, and your reign be in every area of my life, that in every area I declare your praise for your glory and for my good.

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