

LUKE 2:41–52

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

Story Notes

File no. 106

Jesus has grown, as every human should, under God's favour, but now, we discover what he knows about being the Son of his Father. He is brought to the temple at age twelve, possibly because he will soon be able to participate in the worship as a full member of the people of Israel. He is left behind, possibly in a simple confusion between Mary and Joseph as to whether he is travelling with the men or the women, but the end of the day reveals his absence. So, it is the third day before they can search for him in Jerusalem and, finally, find him in the temple. Here, he is deeply involved in learning from Israel's teachers. Questions and answers were the usual method used for education, but, in his case, the teachers are amazed at his aptitude. He shows remarkable insight into the revelation given to Israel, and particularly concerning the temple in which this revelation is focused, as the following remarks reveal.

If the teachers are amazed with his insight, the parents are stunned by his being in the temple rather than with them. Did he not realise what anxiety he has caused them? But then, Jesus is surprised that they would not immediately know where to find him. He is not merely the son of his parents but the Son of his Father. His parents know that (1:31-32). Where else would he be other than in his house?

Neither parent understands what this means, but Mary stores it up as she did the earlier revelations (2:19). For all that, Jesus submits to his parents as he has always done, and this, together with the knowledge of his Father, enables him to grow fully as a man, in wisdom and in body, but also in the favour of his Father and the favour of those with whom he lives. Why not, one may ask, when living in God's favour is the one thing needed for all other true relationships.

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MATTHEW 3:1–17

Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:1–11; Luke 3:1–22; John 1:19–34

A PROPHET FOR GOD'S PEOPLE / JOHN BAPTISES JESUS

Story Notes

File no. 107

John the Baptist was to prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:1–5). It was ‘the Lord’ who was coming, and coming to establish his rule (kingdom) in Israel, and then, the world. He was coming, especially, to comfort his people. John’s appearance was like Elijah’s (2 Kings 1:8), and his ministry had a similar purpose (Matt. 11:14; 17:12–13).

A prophet had not appeared for some four hundred years, but John was recognized as one, and many went out to hear him. Baptism was understood as a purification rite and many wanted to be right with God and ready for the coming of his Messiah.

John taught that God’s kingdom would be established by the one coming after him, the Messiah. This would be a time for cleansing the nation. John also knew that the Pharisees wanted the praise of man and the Sadducees sought political power, and warned them severely. They could not presume on their heritage.

If people thought John’s ministry was decisive, what of the ministry of him who was to come, baptizing the nation in the Holy Spirit and fire? Clearly, no evil would remain when he had finished his work.

John knew that Jesus was much greater than himself, but Jesus insisted on being baptized by John, his older cousin (as we learn from Luke). Jesus knew that his Father wanted him to be one with the people who were confessing their sins and preparing for the reign of God. For him, this was righteousness (cf. Jer. 23:5–6).

The Father identified Jesus as his Son (fulfilling Ps. 2:7) with whom he was pleased (fulfilling Isa. 42:1) by sending the Spirit as a dove to alight on him, and by speaking about him to all who were there. He was identified as God’s Son who would rule the nations (Ps. 2:7; cf. Gen. 22:2), the Servant of the Lord whom God loved (as in Isa. 42:1; also Matt. 12:18). He would establish justice in the earth.

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MATTHEW 4:1–11

Mark 1:12,13; Luke 4:1-13

JESUS TEMPTED BY SATAN

Story Notes

File no. 108

Jesus came out of Egypt as Israel had done (Matt. 2:14–15). Now he was led into a wilderness as Israel had been — to be tested (cf. Deut. 8:2). It was the Spirit who led (or ‘drove him’) him because the Spirit was eager for the mission and the victory of this newly acknowledged Messiah to begin.

As head of the new covenant, he fasted for forty days, as Moses had done as covenant head of Israel (Deut. 9:9,18). The battle with evil powers, to secure a people who would love their God freely, was coming to its climax.

Jesus was also reliving and reconstituting the history of his people as God’s son. Israel had failed in their faith and calling, but now, Jesus, as the Head of the new Israel, showed what sonship was about. The first two trials, or temptations, confronted this Father-Son relationship directly: ‘If you are the Son of God...’

The Son said he lived by every word from his Father’s mouth and refused to accept that his life or the life of his people consisted in just being fed (cf. Deut. 8:3). Satan quoted Psalm 91:11–12, but Jesus refused to understand Sonship as obliging his Father to save him with a persuasive demonstration of power (cf. Deut. 6:16). Satan showed Jesus what he could give him, trying to outdo the inheritance God had shown Moses (Deut. 34:1–4), but Jesus knew any inheritance that put Satan over him would be no inheritance for him or for the people of God; he and his people would worship only the Lord (Deut. 6:13).

Everything for the Messiah and his people would be from the Father (by every word that he spoke), under the Father (don’t tempt him) and to the Father (worship God alone). The Serpent in Eden had fabricated a kingdom of his own, a kingdom which relied on things being ‘good for food, ... a delight to the eyes, and ... desired to make one wise’ (Gen. 3:6). Jesus had come to destroy this kingdom ruled by ‘the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life’ because it was ‘not of the Father’ (1 John 2:16). He would destroy this false reign and draw people to himself and to the Father by the death he would die (John 12:31–33).

The trial being over, angels came and ministered to Jesus. The promise of Psalm 91:11 was still true.

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JOHN 1:29–51
JESUS' FOLLOWERS
Story Notes
File no. 109

About this Gospel

God has revealed himself to us through Jesus Christ. John is writing his whole Gospel to give us reasons to believe this is true (20:31). Jesus is God's Word. He is God. He comes to us from the Father's side and is his eternal Son. He can tell us everything we need to know.

This is the light we need to be truly alive, and fortunately for us, we can't extinguish the light. Like Israel, we don't naturally recognise the Son, or hear him, but everyone who does receive him becomes a child of God. Believers receive the fullness the Son has revealed, all the Father's grace and faithfulness, for us.

To make this unmistakable, his Word has become flesh, really human. Perhaps there is already a hint about how vulnerable the Son is. He is human, mortal. He can die. Just as God camped among his people Israel, so now, God has camped among us. God has linked his future with ours irrevocably. Follow the story of this Son of God, camped among us, and believe in him, and find the life God has revealed in him.

John the Baptist is preparing the way for *the Lord* (Isa. 40:3-5), a Lord who will lead his people out of captivity. But here, Jesus is the coming Lord! John is making a highway so the world will see his glory as he comes. Alongside of this coming one, John the Baptist says he is barely to be considered.

Without any explanation, John says Jesus is the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world. If we are surprised by the word 'flesh' for one who is God, then what of 'lamb'? Those who have come to John for baptism have come with a view to repentance and forgiveness (Luke 3:3), and now they hear that this taking away of sin will happen through a lamb.

John may be thinking of a Lamb among other sheep (a figure of speech from Jewish literature) who saves his people, an idea that becomes prominent in the book of Revelation. Then, he may be referring to the Suffering Servant, who is like a lamb, but will bear the sins of many and make intercession for transgressors (Isa. 53:7, 10, 12). All of Israel's sacrificial system has taught them that there is no remission of sin without shedding of blood, and now, *God's Lamb* has come.

The Holy Spirit himself identifies Jesus by resting on him when he is baptized. He is Israel's new David, and the Servant of the Lord (Is. 11:1-2; 42:1; 61:1). Here is the beginning of the outpouring of the Spirit that God has promised for his people (Is. 44:3; 59:21; 61:1; 63:11).

Not surprisingly, John's disciples begin to move to Jesus. The conversations of the disciples are wonderfully natural. Once they know Jesus, they are confident he will commend himself as Messiah if people come and see for themselves. Nathaniel can't believe that a Saviour would come from Nazareth, but he is struck with the fact that Jesus knows him before being introduced, and knows him accurately. He isn't a Jacob (deceiver) but an Israelite without guile. Philip is right, this is the Messiah! Jesus turns to all who are following him now ('you' is plural) and says that traffic between heaven and earth will now be through him, the Son of Man, not through Jacob (Gen. 28:12).

JOHN 2:1–11
JESUS GOES TO A WEDDING
Story Notes
File no. 110

Christ's 'extended' family now includes six disciples who return with him to Galilee. Their oneness with Jesus is acknowledged in a wedding invitation that includes all of them and it is here that the revelation of his glory begins (as in 1:14, 16). Jesus is full of grace and truth, and John, who has told us this, is present and says that they have seen his glory.

His address to his mother is polite but not familiar. 'What do you and I have in common?' It will be the love of the Father in him for all humanity that will direct his life (5:19). The 'time' for Jesus is 'not yet', meaning the time to be glorified in death and resurrection (7:39; 13:31–32; 17:5). His mother must not, inadvertently, bring things to a head.

But now, Jesus sees the opportunity to reveal himself. In this Gospel, miracle settings are significant, so it is probable that Jesus is not just saving the bridegroom from embarrassment but has in mind the greater wedding at which he will be the bridegroom (c.f. 3:29; Matt. 24:1-14; 25:1-13) and when there would be a liberal outpouring of the wine of the kingdom (Amos 9:13–14; Jer. 31:12).

Jesus asks for water pots, used for ceremonial cleansing, to be filled, brim full, and then, asks for more water to be 'drawn out', a word usually used of drawing water from a well. This latter water is turned into wine—better than any before it.

The size of these pots, and their brimming full, may suggest the liberality of God's provision in this new age (if the water is taken from the pots). On the other hand (if the second 'drawing' is from the well), it may suggest that purification by ceremony is now fulfilled by Christ's appearing. The time for ceremonial cleansing is over. The new wine will not come from Israel's old ceremonies but from its own original source. The better 'wine' of his messianic feast is becoming available.

Numbers may have been aware of the miracle, but it is the disciples who see its meaning—as a sign. How much they understand cannot be known, but John tells, after the event, that the disciples, including himself, saw the glory of grace in some way, and believed in him.

JOHN 2:12–25

Psalm 69:9

JESUS IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

Story Notes

File no. 111

Jesus now makes his first visit to Jerusalem for a Passover as Messiah. He wastes no time in declaring his intention and the intensity of it. He has come to purify the worship of Israel but his action is no real 'cleansing of the temple'. It will take more than a whip to remove the defilement from Israel's worship. What he does, signals the fact that all is not well, and, that it is his task to do this work. The temple has become a place of private and mercenary interest, but, for Jesus, it is his Father's house. Later, Jesus says that people will worship his Father in spirit and in truth (4:23). The 'messenger of the covenant' has come suddenly to his temple so that offerings will be offered in righteousness (Mal. 3:1-6).

The sign of Jesus' right to act as the purifier of Israel is yet to happen. Israel will destroy the temple of his body, and in three days he will raise it up. The fact that no one could yet understand this did not matter. It will be clear to his disciples when it happens, and they understand his meaning.

Many now believe in him, but we find that belief in Jesus can mean many things. John the Baptist, then Jesus himself and then the first miracle have elicited belief among the disciples, and to a limited degree, Jesus has entrusted himself to them; e.g. 'come and see'. However, these Jerusalem crowds are another matter. Christ is the creator of true faith and true knowing of Christ is preceded by Christ's knowing of us (1:42, 48).

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JOHN 3:1–21

John 2:23–25; Numbers 21:9

NICODEMUS COMES TO JESUS

Story Notes

File no. 112

The signs Jesus is performing attract a discreet enquiry from 'the teacher of Israel' (v. 10 suggesting that he is a key figure in Israel). He has concluded that God is with Jesus, a good start, but far short of what we have heard in chapter one.

Nicodemus may long to see the kingdom or reign of God, but what Jesus has come to reveal can only be seen by those who are inside the family, children of God, born from above (or again). Jesus has come to give his 'fullness'. Nicodemus needs water birth, perhaps the baptism of repentance by John, but also needs Spirit birth or baptism in the Spirit, by Jesus.

'How can this be?' Nicodemus asks. He should not be mystified because Ezekiel 36:25-28 and other prophecies show that God will renew his people by the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus tries to reduce what Jesus has said to something natural (and naturally impossible). Jesus says that a person can be born of the Spirit just as certainly as wind blows without any human control.

Nicodemus asks again, 'How...?' He will get no further unless he comes to see who Jesus is. All Christian teaching comes down to this. It is Jesus, God's Word, God himself, bringing us to life. If Nicodemus is real, he will accept what Jesus says. After all, being born again is something that happens in this world. Jesus has so much more to open up! No one has gone into heaven to check on these things, except Jesus, who, in fact, has come down from heaven.

There is one more thing for Nicodemus to learn from his Old Testament: the Son of Man, Jesus himself, must become like the bronze snake in Israel's history (Num. 21:8). This may be incomprehensible for the present, but when the crucifixion happens, Nicodemus will have reason to remember this, and look at Jesus bearing the sins of the world, and be saved. The phrase 'lifted up' in this Gospel always refers to a double lifting, on the cross, but then, into glory (8:28; 12:32-34).

What lies behind this encounter? The apostle John says it is God's love for the world, his not wanting us to die in our sins, and giving to us his only begotten Son to bring us life. Clearly, we deserve to die because we reject the Light who is our Life. On the other hand, Jesus has not come to judge but to save! So, come to the light! This is what it means to live with integrity, living one's life in the light that God has made to shine.

Already, we have heard that God has revealed himself in flesh, and that this one who is God's dear Son will bear sin as God's Lamb. He is God's Temple that will be pulled down. He will be a snake lifted up on a pole so people can be saved. John is insisting that the great work of this Jesus is in his death for us. By this death, he will raise up a family of God.

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JOHN 4:1–42
THE WOMAN AT THE WELL
Story Notes
File no. 113

Jesus must travel through Sychar in Samaria and tiredness brings him to sit at a well while his disciples find food. He has work to do however, and this is the food that will mystify his disciples, and a harvest to reap that they, as yet, cannot see.

Jesus sees no need to avoid Samaria, unlike many of his fellow Jews. Nor did he feel any shame in speaking to a Samaritan woman or in drinking from her utensil, and this surprises her. He speaks of the Father's gift, and of himself as the Giver. She asks if he is greater than Jacob who was the giver of the water he had asked for. He certainly was! He could give her water, within her, springing up to inherit eternal life. Later, we learn that this would be the Holy Spirit (7:37-39). The Baptiser in the Spirit is already offering his water.

What she now understands is not clear, but she wants more of what Jesus offered: 'Give me this water...' she said.

Jesus asks to meet her husband, and, in so doing, opens up what this woman will later see as the key to her whole encounter with him: Jesus can tell her everything she has ever done. She does not retreat, and says she has met a prophet. He has not just told her about herself but about herself in the context of the saving deeds of God. She could have the water of life.

How then can she resolve the problem of her religious upbringing? Jesus is a Jew, and a prophet, but her tradition tells her she must worship at Samaria, contrary to the traditions of the Jews. Firstly, Jesus tells her what the Father wants: not worship in Jerusalem or Samaria but in spirit and truth. The truth of worship at Jerusalem is not the truth of the worshippers but the salvation and promises enshrined in the worship at Jerusalem. Everything depends on how God will save his people. This hour, says Jesus, is coming and has come! He is present (though Jesus doesn't say this just yet)!

The woman now speaks, not of a prophet but of Israel's Messiah who will tell 'all things'. Perhaps she means that he will resolve all religious disputes, but she may mean that in that day, they will worship God truly. She would understand 'Messiah' in terms of Deuteronomy 18:15, the prophet who was to be heeded in all that he said (because Samaritans only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament as scripture). Jesus says, I am that Messiah.

Now we know what this woman means by 'all things' concerning herself. She has not just had her life exposed. She had seen her life in the context of God's flowing streams, water flowing up from within her and flowing out to worship the Father in spirit and truth. Surely, the time has already come for this! She has met someone greater than Jacob and he will give her the water of life. Even now, it flows from her as she leaves her pot to tell her story in the town: 'The man who told me all things about myself. Could he be the Messiah?' (Again, 'all things' and 'Messiah' are linked. The 'all things' that Messiah will reveal are now the 'all things' about herself.)

Our confession of sin is never true until it is first a confession of God and his salvation. Ezekiel says that when God saves his people, they loathe themselves for their sin (Ezek. 36:22-32). An accusation that leads to despair may lead to a confession of sin that is morbid, but this is not from God. The Samaritan woman is not left naked by Jesus exposing her, but rather, clothed in promises of life. God's 'all things' have come to her, as now they come to us.

While the woman has her witness in the town, Jesus speaks to the disciples. They cannot understand the 'food' he has enjoyed, that is, the 'food' of doing his Father's will, sharing in the works of his Father in giving life to this woman and to those who would believe through her word. Nor could the disciples see the harvest he was reaping.

He who knows the gift of God and the giving Messiah can see the true harvest waiting to be reaped: renewed people worshipping the Father in spirit and truth. Jesus is reaping where others have sown, from Jacob through to John the Baptist. The disciples can share in the

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL con't

reaping if they will. Perhaps, Jesus anticipates the day when Phillip will arrive in a Samaritan town (Acts 8:4-8) and reap the harvest that Jesus has sown, by this visit, but also by the laying down of his life for the whole world.

What happens to this woman is now happening to a whole town. They believe because this woman's story is no longer mere gossip but a saving history. Its Teller must be the Messiah. Perhaps he will stay and talk with them for a while. They encounter the same surprising love and the result is as remarkable as the woman's story. In all of this, the disciples are learning to widen their affections so as to be true harvesters. The town believes now because they hear Jesus for themselves. He is not a Jewish bigot but the Saviour of the world. Worship 'in spirit and in truth', rather than just at Jerusalem or Samaria, had already begun to happen.

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LUKE 5:1–11
PETER'S GREAT CATCH
Story Notes
File no. 114

Peter has followed Jesus from the time of John the Baptist and has been called Peter or 'rock' (John 1:42). He has been known as one of the Lord's disciples when invited to a wedding. It appears that there has been an earlier call to these disciples to be fishers of men (Mark 1:16-18) and an earlier occasion where Jesus used a boat for teaching (Mark 3:9; 4:1). But, when this story begins, Peter is still a fisherman.

The level of Peter's discipleship is seen in his calling Jesus 'Master', an acknowledgement of his being Teacher or Rabbi, but, more particularly, in his being willing to obey a direction from a carpenter to do some fishing in deep water and in day light, something he would not normally do.

Peter has seen miracles before, and in his own home (4:38), but nothing has touched him like this great catch. Perhaps it is because it is in the area of his competence. With nets beginning to break, two boats are needed to land the catch, his own (shared with Andrew?), and probably the sons of Zebedee. Jesus has not only shown the authority he has over the seas (c.f. 18:28), but that he is able to provide for these men in abundance. He can call them to leave their nets with no fear that they will be well provided for.

Peter cries out for Jesus to leave him because he is sinful. He has been given a holy gift—a gift from God, and Jesus, whatever Peter thinks of him at this point, is the means of this gift. He moves from calling him 'Master' to 'Lord'. It is doubtful if Peter really wants Jesus to leave, but he is struck with his own unworthiness to be the recipient of what clearly has come from God—to him! We may say, as Paul said later, that the kindness of God had led him to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

H. R. Mackintosh writes: '...there is nothing which so humbles us as to gain a great gift of which we feel ourselves altogether unworthy.' 'The experience of taking forgiveness from God's hand, when true to type, includes this strain of overpowering awe' (*The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, p. 96).

A second act of grace happens. Jesus says these men are not to fear, that is, not fear the holy God whom they have encountered. In fact, he calls them to follow him and says they will catch men. It is one thing to be forgiven, but forgiveness is expressed in this readiness of Jesus to give Peter and his friends a task. The catch they will make is different from these fish. The word suggests catching men alive.

Later, Peter notes that they had left everything to follow Jesus (18:28).

JOHN 5:1–24
LAME FOR THIRTY EIGHT YEARS
Story Notes
File no. 115

We know little about this crippled man apart from the fact that he has been sick for 38 years, waiting for a miracle and a helper to put him in the pool when it was stirred by an angel. He does not give a direct answer to Jesus' question about wanting to be well, but Jesus sees his Father working and that is enough to tell him to take up his bed and walk. He is next found in the temple and may have gone there to worship.

Some see this man as a deliberate recollection of Israel's 38 years of wandering in a desert because of their stubbornness (Deut. 2:14). If this is so, Jesus is demonstrating that the time for Israel to walk again has come.

The attitude of the Jews is remarkable. A man they may well have known is now walking and they can only comment on his breaking the law concerning carrying loads on the Sabbath day. When they hear there is a healer they can only refer to him as the man who told the cripple to carry his bed. They are concerned with preserving their culture, not the saving of anyone.

Jesus clearly prefers obscurity in Jerusalem at this stage but makes himself known to the man later, warning him not to sin lest he be visited with a greater judgement. All this seems to be lost on the man who seeks only to please his accusers. Here is more reason for the Jews to persecute Jesus: their Sabbath is being abused.

For Jesus, the matter is simple: his Father is working, so he works. This only increases Jewish hostility because Jesus has now put himself on a level with God. Jesus then speaks to them about what they call his equality with God. It is truly remarkable that the following remarks are made to such a hostile audience.

'My actions', says Jesus, 'flow from seeing what my Father is doing. And he shows me what he is doing because he loves me'. Already, Jesus knows of greater things to come, although they will not be done ahead of when the Father does them. (The disciples will be involved in the doing of these 'greater works'—John 14:12.) He will raise the dead as the Father can raise the dead because the Father has given judgement to the Son. God is the Judge who has imposed death because of sin and only the Judge can reverse the judgement. The Son is given this honour so we will turn to Christ and be saved. Even now, eternal life is offered through hearing and believing in the Son of God.

Jesus continues. He has life in himself, like the Father. Therefore, graves will open for him. In this, he will be acting as the Son of Man (as in Dan. 7:13-14). All humanity will be summoned from their graves to face his judgement.

The truth of his judgement arises from Jesus only doing the Father's will. It arises from the fact that he does not decide what to say but is bearing witness to what the Father is showing him.

MARK 2:1–12;

Matthew 9:1–8; Luke 5:17–26

DOWN THROUGH THE ROOF***Story Notes***

File no. 116

Many people came to Jesus expecting something to happen. They did not doubt that he would heal them (Matt. 8:3). However, those who believed were relatively few.

The battle between Christ and the powers hostile to God are now taken to a new level. Some believed Jesus could heal their friend, but now they heard Jesus saying that his sins were forgiven. (This is the first occasion we know of where this happened.) So did the scribes. Jesus showed how the reign of God would proceed. It would not remain as an outward display of mercy but speak to and bring relief to the conscience of each person who was prepared for it.

The scribes would not accept that Jesus had authority to forgive. Only God could do that (vs 7). So, they accused him of blaspheming. However, Jesus demonstrated that he did have power to forgive. In front of everyone, he told the man to get up and carry his bed home. Healing would be a sign to them that the man had been forgiven.

God had sent his Son to save them from their sins (Matt. 1:21). They should have recognised that Jesus was dealing with sins more truly than their own attempts to justify themselves.

Nothing in Israel's background could contain what Jesus was doing. However, a ripple (or tidal wave) was reaching out across the community. 'Who is this man?' 'What has he come to do?' people asked.

All Israel was being called into this amazing demonstration of God's reign among them. Jesus was the Shepherd of Israel calling people to receive this revelation of God's mercy, and so, be servants of the kingdom.

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MATTHEW 9:9–13

Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32

MATTHEW BECOMES A DISCIPLE

Story Notes

File no. 117

When Jesus asked Matthew to follow him, he made Israel's leaders angry. It went against the rules they had prescribed for membership in the kingdom of God. Israel's leaders believed that being in the kingdom depended on their offering ritual (sacrifice) rather than on God's mercy. They needed to read Hosea 6:6 to understand the heart of God for his people.

Matthew invited many of his friends home for a meal (so Luke tells us). By accepting this invitation, Jesus demonstrated the truth of God's mercy reaching out to heal them all.

Jesus was anticipating a coming kingdom feast with Jews and Gentiles (Matt. 8:11) and was already celebrating this by feasting with Matthew and his friends. How could he lead his disciples in the regular fasting practised by the Pharisees when it was time to celebrate his presence in Israel as their 'Bridegroom' (Matt. 9:15)? Judaism's piety could not make enough room for Jesus' presence. His presence and mercy needed new arrangements.

Sinners who received Jesus would inherit the kingdom of His Father. Righteous people who refused him would gain nothing from the reign of God.

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