

Lesson 17

- The gospel of John
- The message of Jesus: the kingdom of God
- God's promises

Lesson 17a

The gospel of John

In the last lesson we discussed the first three gospels. In this lesson we will look at the gospel of John. It is a gospel with a totally different character. Both its style and its contents are totally different from the other three gospels. John tells us of speeches and conversations that are not described in the other gospels.

- *The author John*

John was one of Jesus' disciples. Before he became a follower of Jesus he and his brother James worked together as fishermen in their father's business. When Jesus called them to follow Him, they left the business to become 'fishers of men'.

John does not mention his own name in his gospel. When he writes about himself he writes, 'the disciple that Jesus loved' or 'the other disciple'. John also wrote the letters of John and the last book of the bible, Revelation.

- *John's audience*

John writes his gospel for Christians who are not of Jewish descent. He wants to strengthen their faith because they live in a world that gives them incorrect information about Jesus. Some people would claim that Jesus is not really God. Others would say that Jesus is God but not human. John wants to brace the Christians against such false teaching.

- *The aim of John's gospel*

John wants to assure his readers that Jesus truly is the Christ, the Son of God.

John 20:30-31

'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

- *Characteristics of John's gospel*

When we read the gospel of John we notice a number of remarkable aspects:

- An unusual introduction,
- The content differs in many ways from the content of the other gospels,
- It is full of contrasts,
- The images that Jesus uses to describe Himself.

We will discuss these issues one by one.

The introduction

John begins his book in a different way from the other authors of the gospels. Matthew and Luke begin their gospel with a description of Jesus' birth. However, John begins with creation:

John 1:1-2

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made and without him nothing was made that has been made.'

The beginning of John's gospel reminds of the beginning of the book of Genesis. In Genesis we read how in the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth. He created the heavens and the earth by the word of his mouth. When God said: 'Let there be light', there was light. Everything that exists came to be through God's word.

John brings Genesis to mind. He explains that the Son of God whom he here calls 'the Word' was present at creation. The Son of God was with God in the beginning and He was God. He had an important task in creation. He was totally involved, even to such an extent that John can say: everything that exists is there because of the Word, the speaking of the Son of God.

From the very start of his gospel John's message is: Jesus Christ is no ordinary man. He is God. He existed before time. Everything that exists is there because of Him. Only in Him can life be found. Whoever believes in Him can know that he truly is a child of God:

John 1:12 *'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed his name, he gave the right to become children of God'*

In his introduction John also says:

John 1:14 *'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'*

With other words John is saying that the Son of God truly became man. He did not have an illusory body, as some people in John's day believed but rather He truly became flesh. He became just as human as any other human being. Jesus knew what it was to be tired or sad, to suffer pain and to die. He was a real man and yet the Son of God and He lived among us.

The content

The beginning of John's gospel is rather different from those of the other gospels. The same is true for its content. John leaves out many of the events described in Matthew's, Mark's, and Luke's gospels. He mainly describes events, conversations and speeches that we do not find in the other gospels. Apparently, he wants his book to be an addition to the other gospels.

The first three gospels mainly focus on Jesus' work in Galilee in the north of Israel. John's focus is on Jesus' work in the south of Israel in the area around Jerusalem. John also tells us about an event in Samaria, the area between Judea and Galilee. The Samaritans were Jews who had mixed with people from other nations and were not very popular with the Jews. A Jew was not supposed to relate to Samaritans. However, Jesus ignores this rule. When He is in Samaria one

day and He gets thirsty, He asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. The woman is surprised to find a Jewish man ask her, a Samaritan woman, for water. Then Jesus tells her about the living water that He gives to people. If anyone drinks from that water he will never be thirsty again.

John also tells us a lot about the last conversations that Jesus had with his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples how they, his followers, should relate to one another. He tells them that they can only come to God through Him. He tells them about the Holy Spirit that He will send when He returns to his Father and He prays to his Father for them.

Contrasts

The gospel of John is full of contrasts. Jesus emphasises in all sorts of ways how important it is to believe in Him. Whoever believes in Him no longer lives in darkness, but in the light; he will not die but have eternal life; he is not blind but can see. Other contrasts Jesus uses are:

- Earthly as opposed to heavenly,
- Food that is digested as opposed food that remains,
- Ordinary water that does not permanently relieve thirst as opposed to the living water that Jesus gives,
- Lies as opposed to the truth,
- Judging as opposed to saving.

Images Jesus uses to describes Himself

John shows in his gospel how Jesus despite all the enmity there is against Him, continues to point out his significance for the lives of his followers. He often does so by using images to describe Himself. We will look at a few examples.

- *I am the bread of life (John 6:22-59)*
People need bread in order to live. That is why God fed the people of Israel during their journey to the promised land of Canaan. Every night, grain would rain down from heaven that

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the Israelites could use to bake their own bread. This grain was called manna and enabled the Israelites to survive their journey through the desert.

Jesus compares Himself to the manna. Like it, He is bread from heaven. In the same way that God used the manna to save the Israelites from dying in the desert, He has now sent his Son to the earth to save people from eternal death. Manna sustained life on earth but Jesus gives life for eternity.

- *I am the light of the world (John 8:12)*

Jesus calls Himself the light of the world. People who live without Him live in darkness. However, if anyone follows Jesus he does not need to walk in darkness. He will possess the light of a new life that does not perish.

- *I am the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6)*

There is only one way to come to God and that is through Jesus. Jesus is 'the way, the truth and the life'. Whoever knows Jesus, knows the truth and whoever believes in Jesus can come to God and receive eternal life.

Other images Jesus uses are:

- I am the good shepherd (John 10:11-16)
- I am the gate for the sheep (John 10:7-9)
- I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26)
- I am the true vine (John 15:1-8)

A complete history

The gospel of John is a valuable addition to the other three. John has included conversations and statements in his gospel that clarify the significance of who Jesus is. If we read one of the gospels we get a good general impression of the history of Jesus' life on earth. When we read all four gospels, we have a complete picture.

Questions

1. What important information does John give right at the start of his gospel? Read John 1:1-18.
- 2a. Why does Jesus use contrasts?
- 2b. What does Jesus want to communicate with the imagery He uses to describe Himself?
3. Why is it better to read all four gospels than just one?

The message of Jesus: the kingdom of God

Lesson 17b

The message of Jesus: the kingdom of God

Jesus travels around the area of Galilee with an important message. He tells the people that the kingdom of God is at hand. He very soon becomes a well-known character. Besides his twelve disciples there are other people who travel along with Him. They do not want to miss a word of what He is saying. In this lesson we will focus on the teaching of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount

One day Jesus gives a long speech about the kingdom of God for his disciples and everyone who wants to listen. He explains which people belong to the kingdom of God and what the law of the kingdom is. He uses a range of examples to clarify how the citizens of God's kingdom should or should not behave. He also explains in what way people should talk to God. This speech is called the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus gave it on a mountain. We will now discuss a few parts of this sermon in more detail.

The citizens of God's kingdom

At the start of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explains what the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven will look like. He also tells who the kingdom is for, who will be the citizens of the kingdom.

Read: Matthew 5:1-12

5:3 *blessed*: happy, to be congratulated

Every verse in this passage has two components. The first component always begins with the word 'blessed'. These parts of the verses tell us which people belong in God's kingdom. The second halves of the verses tell us something about the nature of the kingdom.

When you make a list of all the characteristics of the kingdom it is evident that its citizens await a lot of happiness:

- God will comfort them. Even the most agonising sadness will have disappeared.
- God will give them the earth as an inheritance.
- God will fill them with righteousness.
- God will show them grace.
- They will see God – which is not possible in this life.
- God will regard them as his children and He will be their Father.

Who will belong to this kingdom? We can tell from the first component of each verse. Jesus tells his listeners what their life should be like if they want to belong to God's kingdom:

- They need to be poor in spirit. That means that toward God they need to be like beggars. They need to be totally dependent on God for spiritual things as a beggar is totally dependant on other people for material things.
- They need to mourn. They need to be sad about the sin in the world and the power of Satan.
- They need to be meek – not fighting for their own rights but friendly towards others.
- They need to hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, they need to be aware of their own lack of righteousness and ask God to satisfy them with righteousness, to make them into righteous people.
- They need to be merciful – help people who are in trouble.
- They need to be pure in heart – without impure thoughts and intentions.
- They need to be peacemakers – not looking for conflict but loving towards their enemies.

Jesus warns the people that it will not always be easy to be a citizen of God's kingdom. The citizens risk being insulted, persecuted and falsely accused. But even if that happens they have reason to be happy. It is a proof that they belong to Jesus Christ and their reward is waiting for them.

The law of God's kingdom

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus also explains what the law is in God's kingdom. He does not invent new laws. The law that God has given to Israel will be the same for the kingdom of God. However, Jesus makes clear that He wants people to treat God's law differently than they are used to. God is not satisfied with outward obedience to his commandments.

People can seemingly live by God's law but do the exact opposite of what God intended.

Jesus gives a few examples. Perhaps a man has kept God's commandment not to commit adultery all his life. However, to God that does not count if he has been looking at other women wishing he could start something with them. Or someone might think he has kept the commandment to love his neighbour but when he only regards the people of his own nation as his neighbour, it does not count before God. God wants the citizens of his kingdom to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them. They need to show that they are children of a God who cares for good and bad people.

God's kingdom should go before everything else

Jesus tells the people not to be focussed on what they eat or drink or how they dress. If someone belongs to God he does not need to worry about these issues. God feeds the birds and beautifully dresses the flowers of the field and He will make sure his children will receive food and clothes.

People who belong to God should be focussed on what is of real importance: the kingdom of God. God's kingdom should have the first place in their lives.

An important choice

Read: Matthew 7:24-29

At the end of his speech Jesus gives his listeners an important choice. They can either choose to live the way He has described or they can reject his words. Their whole life will depend on what they decide to do with the words of Jesus. If

someone listens to the words of Jesus and then decides not to take them to heart, he is like someone who is so foolish as to build his house on sand. A house without a foundation will last for a while but eventually it will go wrong. If someone takes Jesus' words to heart, he is like a person who builds his house on the foundation of a rock. Whatever disaster happens, a house on a good foundation will stand.

The people who have listened to Jesus' sermon are amazed, not only about what He has said but also about the way in which He spoke. They are used to the teachers of the law who base everything they say on what other teachers before them have said. However, Jesus does not need to base his teaching on anyone else's thoughts. He has authority.

A heavy burden?

How can someone become a citizen of the kingdom of God that Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount? Aren't God's standards too high? Can anyone expect a person to love his enemies, to always be faithful to his wife even in his thoughts and to be pure in heart, poor in spirit and meek? Doesn't God know that people have been affected by sin? It seems Jesus is asking too much from people in this sermon. However, this is not the case. Whoever comes to Jesus will indeed have a burden to carry but it will feel as if he has been freed of a much greater burden. Jesus clarifies this in a parable that He told his disciples not long before his death.

The vine and the branches

Read: John 15:1-8

15:1 *true vine*: the vine that lives up to all expectations

15:3 *you are already clean*: God counts you as people without sin

Jesus uses an image that is very familiar to the Israelites, the image of the vine. Jesus compares Himself to the stem of a vine and his followers to its branches, where the grapes grow.

The message of Jesus: the kingdom of God

Jesus says: 'A branch will not survive on its own'. That is obvious. For a branch to bear fruit it needs to be connected to the stem. A branch that has been cut off cannot continue to live as if nothing happened. It will receive no more food and die.

Jesus explains: 'It is exactly the same for you. If you live separately from me, you cannot bear fruit'. That is to say: when people try to live without Jesus they cannot live the way Jesus intended. They cannot do what God asks from them. They cannot live as citizens of God's kingdom.

Jesus promises his followers: 'If you are connected with me, you will bear fruit'.

People who belong to Jesus can do things that they would not have been able to do otherwise. Jesus gives them the power to do so.

God's kingdom is not for people who think they are perfect. It is for people who know that they are completely unable to keep God's law and who want to turn to Jesus. Those people will experience that his burden is light. Jesus is in them and they are in Jesus; they have a very strong relationship with Him. Jesus gives them the power to fight against bad habits and wrong desires. He helps them to become different, to begin to live the way God intended.

It seemed impossible to become a citizen of God's kingdom but Jesus makes the impossible possible.

Rewarded in God's kingdom?

No one can belong to God's kingdom of his own power. No one can earn eternal life – which is part of God's kingdom. Only because of God's goodness can people belong to his kingdom. When Jesus' disciples left everything behind them to follow Jesus they did not do so out of their own power. God worked in them and caused them to do so.

The wonderful thing is that God does want to give them a reward. Jesus promises his followers: 'Everyone who gives up his house, his family or his possessions for me, will receive it back hundredfold and he will receive eternal life'. The reward

for Jesus' followers is enormous and beyond comparison to what they have done.

Jesus' disciples know that they have only followed Jesus because of what God has done in them. However, they do run the risk of forgetting this. They might regard it as their own effort and become proud about what they have given up for Jesus. Jesus warns them that if they become proud they might end up last in the kingdom of God. Again He clarifies it with a parable.

Read: Matthew 20:1-16

20:2 a *denarius*: a normal day's wage

20:3 *the third hour*: they started counting at 6 AM. It was 9 AM.

A man who owns a vineyard goes out to the market in the morning to hire labourers for the day. He agrees to pay them a denarius. In the course of the day he goes to the market a few more times to hire people. Even at 5 PM he goes again, only one hour before it gets dark and the labourers stop their work. When the work is finished the owner pays the labourers.

Everyone, no matter how long they worked, receives a denarius. The people who have worked all day protest. However, the owner of the vineyard answers: 'My friend, what do you lack? I have given you what I promised. Can I not give the others the same? Isn't it my money?'

In a society where people are paid according to the number of hours that they have worked, the protests of the labourers seem justified. However, this parable is about the kingdom of God where there are different standards of what is fair and what is unfair.

With this parable Jesus wants to explain to his disciples that God does not reward people for the hours they have made. God does not act unjustly when He gives everyone the same reward whether people have been Christians all their lives or have only chosen Christ at the last minute.

God does not reward people for their achievements but only because of his own goodness.

When will the kingdom of God come?

Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand. Is the kingdom here now? On the one hand you could say that it is. By giving his life Jesus has conquered the kingdom. Wherever people regard God as the king of their lives and live as citizens of his kingdom, something of his kingdom can be seen.

On the other hand it is very clear that God's kingdom is not yet in power everywhere. Only when God decides the time has come will his kingdom come in its full power and glory. God will live with men and the earth will become one great paradise. Satan will no longer exist and everyone will live according to the rules of God's kingdom.

Questions

1. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus mentions three aspects of the life of a believer. Read Matthew 6:1-18.
 - 6:1 *acts of righteousness*: behaviour that comes as a result of faith
 - 6:9 *hallowed*: honoured
 - 6:13 *lead us not into temptation*: keep us from sin
the evil one: Satan
 - 6:16 *fast*: a way to focus on God. Fasting is a sign of mourning or repentance and it goes accompanied by prayer.
 - a. Which three aspects does Jesus talk about?
 - b. What does Jesus forbid as it comes to these issues? Explain why.
 - c. How should followers of Jesus behave?
 - d. Why? What is the general rule that Jesus tries to teach his followers? In what verse can you find this rule?
 - 2a. If someone wants to belong to the kingdom of God he needs to work hard for it.
 - 2b. If someone wants to belong to the kingdom of God he does not need to do anything.
- With which of these statements do you agree? Why? Compare Mark 10:13-16.

Lesson 17c

God's promises

In the previous lessons we discussed the ninth article of the Apostolic Creed, about the church. In this lesson we will discuss the last three articles of the creed: I believe in 'the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and life everlasting'.

God promises wonderful things

When a person believes, God is the centre of his life. At many occasions this means that he can no longer decide for himself what he can or cannot do. At times this can be difficult. Faith in God can be costly. However, a believer receives a reward that is many times more than what he has had to give up. In these last three articles of the creed we learn what the reward is. God promises to everyone who believes in Him:

- Forgiveness of sins,
- The resurrection of the body from death,
- An eternal life with Him.

Forgiveness of sins

God's first promise to the people who believe in Him is that He will forgive their sins. We have already mentioned forgiveness of sins a great number of times during this course. It is inevitable. Forgiveness of sins is vital for every human being. If God would give us what we deserve, we would have to die an eternal death. Even the most pious people would not have a chance to go to heaven. There is no one who does not sin. Even if someone seems to do well from our point of view, it is not good enough for God. The bible says:

Romans 14:23

'Everything that does not come from faith is sin'

Not only things like stealing, swearing, lying or killing are sins. God regards as sin everything that we do not do out of faith,

out of our love for Him. If we look at our deeds, our words and our thoughts in this light, there is very little left that can be called good.

Fortunately, God does not want to judge us for our imperfections and our sin. When we believe in Jesus Christ God no longer looks at our bad thoughts, words and deeds. He looks at the work of his Son. Because of what Jesus has done God wants to forgive us and regard us as righteous people.

The resurrection of the body and everlasting life

God promises not only forgiveness of sins to the believer. He also promises the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. God promises that whoever believes in Him will one day rise from the grave. He also promises that whoever belongs to Him will live with Him forever. Because these two things are closely related, we will discuss them together.

Death does not belong

The bible speaks a lot about death. It is remarkable that the bible does not deny that death is a terrible thing even if people who believe go to heaven. Death is horrendous and the bible is clear about that. The bible calls death an enemy. It does not belong in creation.

Not everyone sees it that way. There are people who say: 'Death is a natural part of life just as the night naturally follows the day. Death is part of God's creation and at some point one person just needs to make place for someone else'. However, the bible speaks very differently about death. It is not part of life. Death spoils God's good creation. Death is what God warned Adam of. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command, God had to punish them by allowing death to come into the world. However, death was certainly not a part of God's good creation.

Risen from the death

Death does not have the last word

The bible is clear about death being our enemy. On the other hand the bible shows us that death is not the end. God promises the believers:

- They will live with Jesus Christ in heaven after their death,
- One day death will be permanently conquered. Believers will rise from their graves and live forever with God on earth.

Death is not the permanent end. Because of God's goodness it can even become the gate to a wonderful life.

In one of his letters Paul speaks with longing about life after death. To die he calls a gain compared to the life on earth. He cannot make a choice between whether he would rather want to live on or to die.

Philippians 1:23-24 *'I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.'*

remain in the body: to stay alive

If he would only think of himself Paul would rather die because being with Christ is the best thing a man can wish for.

Live continues

Death remains a terrible thing. Even for Christians. Christians can be very sad when someone they loved has died. But they are not just sad because they know God's promise that He will not leave someone who belongs to Him. Not even in death. They know that death is not the end for someone who has died because Jesus has said:

John 11:25 *'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.'*

At first sight, this does not seem to be the reality. The person who has died is buried like every other person that has died.

His body will waste away like the bodies of all people who have been buried. However, about a Christian we can be sure that he is not truly dead. He lives and is with God.

How is it possible that someone who has died lives on at the same time? It is possible because a person does not only have a body but also a soul and a spirit.

You could say that someone's soul is the 'I' of that person. His soul is what makes a human being into a specific person. The soul is the person itself, his true self.

During life a person's body and soul cannot be separated. Nevertheless, it happens when a person dies. The body is put in a grave and the soul goes to God. Although his body is dead the person lives on in a way that we cannot understand.

Paradise

We do not know what exactly happens when someone dies. However, we do know that for believers life after death is a very happy life. When Jesus was hanging on the cross there were two other men hanging on crosses on either side of Him. Both of them were criminals who had received death penalty from the Romans. One of these men believed that Jesus was the Christ even though He was hanging powerlessly on a cross. He asked Him: *'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'* Jesus promised him: *'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise'* (Luke 23:42-43). Jesus calls life after death a paradise.

In the book of Revelation it says: *'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord'* (Revelation 14:13). That is to say, if someone dies after he has given himself over to Jesus, the Lord, he is to be called happy. You do not need to be sorry for that person. It is the best thing that could have happened to him.

First to purgatory?

According to the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church a believer does not go straight to heaven when he dies. They argue that is not possible for a person to come

before God while he is still wearing his dirty clothes, as it were. A believer has committed many sins in the course of his life and needs to undergo a punishment for them. That is why he needs to go to purgatory. It is a cleansing fire that is between heaven and hell. In purgatory someone has to receive the punishment for the sins that have not yet been forgiven. When that has happened, when all his clothes are clean, he can go to heaven. It can take a while before someone is ready. However, during his life on earth a believer can cause this time to be shorter by praying and bringing mass sacrifices*.

This teaching cannot be found in the bible. The bible does not mention purgatory. On the contrary, from the bible we know that a believer can be sure that after his death he will go straight to heaven to be with Christ. Not because a believer has not committed many sins but because Jesus has already been punished for all those sins and failures. We do not need to add anything to the work of Christ in order to go to heaven. Even though we will be doing and thinking bad things until the very end of our lives, if we believe in Jesus Christ, we do not need to be afraid that we still need to undergo punishment for it. When we die, our sinful nature dies along with us. We can enter heaven with clothes that have been washed with the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not tell the criminal next to Him on the cross: 'When you will have suffered for all your sins, you will be with me in paradise'. No, Jesus promised that he would be with Him in paradise on that very same day.

Resurrection of the body

So far we have discussed the soul, which goes to heaven after death. However, God does not forget our body. It is not of less importance to Him than our soul. He has made our body and sustained it throughout our lives. He will make sure our body will be reunited with our soul. When Jesus returns to the earth we will raise from death, just like Him. We will have a real body.

We do not know how it is possible for a body that has totally disintegrated to come back to life. Nevertheless, we know that it is going to happen. Paul tells us so in one of his letters. He compares the body of a Christian who has died to a seed. When a seed is sown in the earth, it first dies, but after a while a plant grows out of it. It seems impossible that from such a small seed a whole plant can grow but that is what happens. If the Holy Spirit can do such a thing to a seed, why could He not do it to a man's body? One day He will give all people who belong to Jesus Christ a new body. It will be more beautiful and wonderful than their old bodies. It will be imperishable. Illnesses, disabilities, age or death will no longer affect it. It will be a spiritual body, a body that is ruled by the Holy Spirit. There will be no more sin in it; there will only be room for the Holy Spirit. When people have been raised from the death they will no longer sin. We will finally be able to serve God with our bodies and souls in a perfect way.

Eternal life

Whoever belongs to Jesus Christ has the promise of eternal life. Eternal life is not a matter of the distant future. We do not have to wait for it to start until a person dies or Jesus returns to the earth. Eternal life starts here and now. We know that from Jesus' prayer to his Father:

John 17:3

'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'

When a person knows and loves God and knows Jesus Christ as his Saviour, he already has eternal life. We saw earlier that this does not mean that he will not end in the grave. However, death will not be able to take life from him. After his death he will continue to live with God in heaven and when Jesus returns, he will rise from the grave. Together with all people that belong to Jesus Christ he will live on the new earth. God will live with the people and relate to them the way He related to Adam and Eve. There will be nothing to separate God from man. Everyone will be inexpressibly happy, forever.

Risen from the death

Questions

1. People who belong to God are called holy (for example in Ephesians 1:1 and 1:4, compare lesson 14c). Why then do they still need forgiveness of sins?
2. Should a Christian long for death (compare Philippians 1:23)? Explain.
3. Nothing in this life can be compared to the wonderful things God promises. What do you think of this statement?