

What is the best way to start a New Year?

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us just for a wee while to turn back to Max Gospel and we're actually going to look at the whole passage that we read, but I'll just read again, verses 40 to 41 of chapter 1.

A leper came to Jesus imploring him and kneeling said to him, if you will, you can make me clean. Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean.

Once we start 20, 25 together, there's always lots to think about, there's lots to look forward to, many exciting things are happening this year and I'm sure all of us can think of things that we're looking forward to in the months ahead.

There's lots that we want to achieve, so maybe for some people here there's big things ahead, maybe it's a big year at school, maybe it's a year where there'll be changes in work, in home, whatever it may be, but there's lots of things that we want to do or maybe in many ways we just want to keep going as we are, keep working, keep serving, keep looking after our families and friends and loved ones.

And there's probably lots that we want to change as well and it's always good to think about that as a new year begins, that are good that we want to maybe habits that we want to move on from and new things that are good that we want to start.

[1 : 19] So it's definitely a time of excitement, renewal, anticipation and hope and there's always something wonderful about New Year's Day, a new year is a wonderful opportunity and we want to recognise that, we want to make the most of it and we definitely don't want to squander it.

So that means we want to ask the question, what's the best way to start a new year? And I really just want to give you a very simple answer, I want to say that I think the best way to start a new year is to think about Jesus.

And the reason I say that is because thinking about Jesus is life changing and that's really the claim that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Thinking about Jesus, knowing Jesus, following Jesus, listening to him will change your life. That's the whole aim of the Gospel, to change your lives for the better, to change our eternities for the better.

And millions and millions of people over the last 2000 years and all across the world today can testify that that's exactly what's happened to them and it's exactly what's happened to me.

[2 : 37] And whilst we always want to try and learn as much as we can from the Bible and we want to apply it in every area of life and we want to stretch ourselves in so many ways, we also just must never move on to one of the most basic facts that knowing Jesus is just amazing.

It's the best thing that's ever happened to me and every Christian here will say the same thing, it is the best thing that can happen to us.

And wherever we are, whether we're committed followers of Jesus, energized and ready for the new year, whether we are following Jesus, but we feel like we are stumbling and struggling, whether we are maybe just not really sure where we stand and still kind of looking for answers or assurance or certainty or maybe we're just a bit hesitant and skeptical.

Wherever you are on that journey, I hope that what we'll look at today will help us all to see that thinking about Jesus is going to transform your life for the better.

But if that's going to happen, then one thing that's essential is that our thinking about Jesus has got to be accurate. And that's a crucial issue because a lot of people have a kind of idea of Jesus or an idea of Christianity that's actually of their own making and we are not recommending that, that is not what's needed, is not helpful.

[3 : 59] Our thinking about Jesus has to be grounded in truth, in the truth of who he is and that's why our thinking about Jesus needs to be shaped by what is revealed about him in the Bible.

And I hope you definitely know that when I or any other preacher stands up, we are not in any way trying to put forward what we think.

We're always trying to put forward what God is revealing in his word. So what's the best way to start a new year?

To think about Jesus more. That's actually a lot more complicated than it sounds because when it comes to Jesus, there is a lot of awesome stuff to think about. And so today I just want us to use the passage that we read to highlight four things that we see in Jesus.

They are compassion, authority, friendship and courage. And as we go into a new year, these are four things that we definitely want and that we desperately need.

[5 : 04] So first of all, we need to think about the compassion of Jesus because we live in a world that is very merciless.

And there's many, many exceptions to that, definitely. But on the whole, it is the case that the culture around us is harsh and I think everybody would agree that it seems to be getting harsher. The era we live in, things like social media have definitely intensified that problem. So we live in a day just now where mistakes are highlighted and mocked. Failure is brutally exposed in people's lives.

Second chances are becoming rarer and rarer. And people who think differently from us or who behave differently from us are automatically seen as a threat. And so more and more people are inclined to see the worst in others and media will only report the things that have gone wrong and the bad things that are happening.

And as a result, we see other people as a problem. We want to try and hide our own weaknesses. We want to try and protect ourselves. We keep others at arm's length.

[6 : 09] And so our weaknesses are hidden. Other people's struggles and failures are kept away. We always feel the need to look strong. And one of the reasons why all of this stuff thrives in our society is because the sin in our hearts loves this because it's an opportunity for pride to have a field day.

In the world that we live in today, it's so, so easy to feel better about ourselves when we're looking down at others or comparing ourselves with others or having a harsh critical view of those around us.

That's the world we live in. That's the world our children are growing up in. And in that world, that is harsh and merciless.

Where can you find compassion? And the answer is in Jesus. And that's seen so magnificently in leper. Loads that we could say about this, I just wanted to say about this.

Loads that we could say about this, I just want to highlight one word. That word, pity. This comes from the Greek word, it's a verb, it's related to the Greek word, I don't know if I can really spell this well in English.

[7 : 22] The Greek word, splachna, which is such a cool sounding word. It's a very cool word. In fact, if we do five cool Greek words part two this year, then this one will be one of them I think.

It's the Greek word for your bowels or your gut. And it's a really cool word because it's, well your gut will do two things to you.

Your gut will either make you recoil or it will give you a longing. Now that's proved by olives.

Because some of you are thinking about olives right now and you are recoiling and you're thinking, ugh, and others are thinking, oh I love an olive right now.

Your gut will make you recoil or it will make you long. A leper would have made everybody recoil in their gut. So a leper in the first century was contagious.

So if you went near them you were highly at risk of catching something awful. They were ceremonially unclean, so that meant from a religious context they were absolutely somebody you had to stay away from.

[8 : 36] And they were unpleasant because they had dirty wounds, just a horrible skin condition that would have been just smelly and awful for the person but also unpleasant for people around them.

So everybody would recoil from a leper except Jesus. The suffering and sorrow and rejection experienced by this leper does not move Jesus to recoil.

It gives Jesus a longing to help him, to move towards him with pity and compassion.

And that's brought out by the conversation that Jesus has with the leper because it all focuses on this whole question of willingness.

The leper says, are you willing to make me clean? Jesus says, I am. I will be clean. That highlights a really important point, that compassion is not really a question of ability, it's a question of willingness and Jesus is beautifully willing.

[9 : 48] Two points of application I want to bring out here. One is obvious, the other is more subtle but probably more important. The obvious point of application is that when we see that kind of compassion in Jesus we want to show that compassion ourselves.

So the way we interact with other people, people around us in the community at work in our home, whatever their circumstances, if other people are recoiling we want to be like Jesus and to move towards him with compassion and kindness.

That's such a brilliant thing for us to do in 2025. That's the obvious application to show the same compassion as Jesus. The second point of application I think is even more important because first and foremost you need to rest in the compassion that Jesus has for you.

You need to rest in the compassion that Jesus has for you. Because I am sure that you can stand in the mirror and see things that makes your gut want to recoil.

That never happens with Jesus. A longing for you, a longing for his gut towards you is compassion. A longing for you, a longing to help you and support you and love you and cherish you and build you up and help you and hold you close forever and you need to rest in the compassion that he has for you every day this year.

[11 : 19] And the reason why that's the more important application is because it's only as you do that and as you rest and enjoy the security and confidence and delight that comes from knowing the compassion of Jesus.

It's only as you do that more that you're actually then far better equipped to show compassion and help to others. In Jesus we see beautiful compassion. We also see authority and we need to think about Jesus as authority because we live in a world where all around us there are competing powers.

So whether that's politics, business, entertainment, schools, fashion, spending, all around us, voices are shouting at us, trying to get us to listen to them.

And that can leave us very confused. We don't even know the world around us, the culture around us is struggling with that. We don't even know if we want authority.

So do we want boundaries in our lives? Do we want rules? What is the framework for right and wrong in terms of ethical decisions and behavioral expectations?

[12 : 27] We don't really know if we want authority. We don't, and if we do want it, we don't really know who should have it. So do we say that it's the government that's got authority, that the government should be able to tell us what to do and we should just listen to everything that they say?

Should every individual be able to decide what they want to do? What they want to be? What does tolerance look like if people disagree? Who's in charge? Should we listen to somebody just because they're rich or successful or beautiful?

And in terms of exercising authority, we don't really know what that should look like. So does exercising authority mean being dominant? Does it mean being aggressive? Does it mean raising your voice?

Does it mean controlling people? How does authority relate to accountability? What voices should you listen to? All of this is swirling all around us all the time.

Two crucial things that we need to remember. One, humanity needs authority. Now that's maybe something that we don't think about or recognise, but it's actually blatantly obvious. Humanity needs authority.

[13 : 28] So whether it's a classroom or an operating theatre or a bank or a parliament or even manner roundabout, none of these can function without authority structures over them.

But the fact that we need authority is not enough. We actually need good authority. Humanity needs good authority. And that comes back to the fact that it's so relevant because as you go into 2025, lots and lots of voices are going to tell you what you should or shouldn't do.

So you're going to be told what you should or shouldn't eat. So that might be the advertising industry telling you to eat something delicious but probably bad for you. Or it might be a kind of

healthy eating campaign telling you to eat something good for you that's not particularly delicious at all.

You might be told what to wear, whether that's fashion industry or whether it's just the health and safety person at work. You might be told what to watch, whether it's by adverts or algorithms or just the pressure of keeping up with what everybody else is watching.

Thousands more examples and some of it's very good. Some of it's harmless enough. Some of it can be very, very harmful. All of this helps us to see why Jesus is just amazing.

[14:42] I want you to look at the first part of chapter two. This is the famous incident where Jesus just wanted to highlight one thing. I want to highlight the fact that this is a magnificent display of Jesus's authority.

It's a magnificent display of Jesus's authority. That's seen in a very obvious way and it's seen in a not very obvious way. The obvious way is the fact that Jesus forgives the man's sins and then heals him to prove it.

You've got this. We read it together. The man comes down, Jesus says your sins are forgiven. The leaders are saying, who can do that? You can't do that. Only God can do that. Jesus says, well, is it easier for me to say your sins are forgiven that nothing changes if you say sins are forgiven and everything looks the same?

What if I say to him, rise up and walk? If he doesn't rise up and walk, then what I say means nothing. Then he says, so you know that I had the authority to forgive sins, up you get.

That's what happened. There was a lot riding on the fact that that man needed to stand up at that moment. That's exactly what happened. Jesus's authority is demonstrated in a very obvious way, but they're not so obvious way, but equally important is the fact that Jesus calls himself this, the Son of Man.

[15:57] There's a phrase that comes up again and again in the Gospel as Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man very, very often. The reason that's not so obvious is because it's only by knowing the Old Testament background to that phrase that we see the significance of it.

The main place where that phrase, Son of Man comes from is Daniel chapter 7. There's a figure in a vision that Daniel sees described as the Son of Man. The big, big, big emphasis is that that Son of Man has authority.

And Daniel chapter 7 is all about this position of authority, power and control. And so Son of Man is not just a phrase saying that Jesus is a human alongside being God.

That's not really the emphasis at all. The emphasis is on authority, which means it's no surprise that two words later, that's exactly what you find Jesus mentioning.

All of it is saying that Jesus has authority. And it's so interesting because the religious leaders at that time, the people who are criticising Jesus, they were the ones who were exerting an unhealthy, damaging authority over people.

[17:08] They were telling them what they could and couldn't do, highlighting everybody's faults. And Jesus comes and shows here and throughout the Gospels that he's the one with real authority.

But it's even more amazing than that. I want to pull out two more things. One, Jesus as authority is utterly bound up with the fact that he is kind.

And I want you to never forget that. That in Jesus you see total uncompromising authoritative kindness.

And that's really what the Gospel is talking about when it refers to grace. Grace is all about the fact that God freely forgives our sins and freely gives to us what we could never deserve.

And the whole reason he can do that is because he has the authority to do that. Grace displays astonishing kindness, but it stands on absolute authority.

[18:11] In fact, you need authority in order to be kind. I need the keys of my car to be mine if I'm going to give them to you so that you can use my car.

And again, you see the contrast between the religious leaders and Jesus. The religious leaders were using their supposed authority to heap up the sins on people, to load up their guilt and to tell them all the things that they were doing wrong, all the ways in which they were failing to the authority to forgive sins.

He uses that authority to be kind. And so Jesus's authority is always bound up with the fact that he's kind. But the second thing that we, again, it's maybe obvious, but it's so important to remember, Jesus's authority is absolute.

So Jesus has ultimate authority over everything. He has ultimate authority to command what's right. He has ultimate authority to judge all that is wrong.

And that means that his kindness to you, his commitment to you, his declaration that your sins are forgiven if you are trusting in him, his instruction to you in how to go through your life, it's all grounded on his eternal, absolute authority.

[19 : 36] And I want you to compare that with the fact that the voices around us that are telling us what to do in 2025 are different to what they were in 2015 and they're different to what they were in 2005 and they're going to be different again in 2035 and different again in 2045.

And the voices around us sound authoritative, but they're constantly in flux, constantly changing and very often contradicting one another. Over all that stands the eternal, unchangeable authority of Jesus.

And that means that if you're a Christian or if you become one, you have finally found the voice that you need to listen to.

You finally found the voice that you need to listen to. So in Jesus, we see authority, but we also see friendship. We need to think about the friendship of Jesus because so often we feel isolated.

Now for some people, isolation comes from just being on your own and that's a reality that often we can face and it can happen at different stages in our lives, especially if something changes.

[20 : 45] So in 2025 if something changes, that brings a risk of feeling isolated. So maybe you'll go from primary school into high school and you think, oh, my friends aren't in my class and you feel on your own.

Maybe you start a new job, maybe you leave home, maybe you retire and you don't see the people that you spend every day with at work and maybe, and this is the hardest one of all, maybe isolation will come from losing somebody that you love so much.

And all of that's incredibly difficult and often we can feel isolated because we're on our own. At the same time, it's important to recognize that feeling isolated doesn't always mean being on your own.

It can also be the feeling that you're the only one. And that can happen even though you're surrounded by people. So in fact, it happens because you're surrounded by people because you look at everybody else and you think, I'm the only one who feels like this.

And it can happen in loads of different ways. You can be in a room full of people and you think, man, they're all beautiful. I'm the only one in here who's ugly.

[21 : 58] Or you're in a room at work and you think, man, everybody in this room is clever. I'm the only one who's stupid. And it can happen to us as Christians. So you can be in a room full of church and think, I'm the only Christian in here who has major doubts.

Or I'm the only one in here who has made massive mistakes. And the only one in here who struggles with temptation about money or sex or possessions.

And the only one in here who doesn't really understand this part of the Bible or what Thomas is talking about. So often we feel like we're the only one.

And it leaves us feeling so isolated. And that makes us afraid of people finding out, we're anxious that we're going to be judged. And so maybe we know everyone, but maybe we feel like we have very few friends.

I think that is probably exactly how Levi felt. Levi also known and referred to as Matthew was a tax collector.

[23 : 06] As a tax collector, he knew everyone because that's his role in the community. He has to make sure that every person in the community is paying their tax to the Romans.

So as the tax collector, he knew everyone. Everyone knew him. As the tax collector, no one liked him.

And that's because tax collectors were even worse than they were. And I shouldn't say that, that's unfair. But they were definitely bad then because they were seen as traitors working for the Romans. They betrayed their nation and the whole thing was quite corrupt as well.

So in that community that we have before us here in Mark 2, Matthew was famous and friendless. And there are probably much more people than you think who feel just like him.

Maybe not famous as in like famous in terms of nationally, but like well known in the community.

And you think, oh, they've got loads of friends and maybe they feel like they actually have very, very few.

[24 : 09] And again, this is where we see that Jesus is just the best. Jesus is just amazing because he calls Matthew to follow him and then he immediately goes and eats with him at his house.

And that's telling Matthew and it's telling everybody who's there and everyone who's watching on that Jesus has not just gained a new follower. That is so important in the first century.

And we may be recognized that a little bit more now because we don't tend to eat in each other's houses as much as we used to. And you realize actually, well, to go and eat in someone's house is actually a really special thing.

And it shows that there's a friendship, a beautiful friendship forming. And the great point that's been emphasized here is that in Jesus we see a beautiful commitment to friendship.

That is so, so clear as you go through the Gospels, you see it with the 12 disciples, you see it with others like Mary, Martha, Lazarus. The others who became such close friends of Jesus and all of these in the Gospels who we see are functioning as an example of the relationship that Jesus wants to have with all of his people.

[25 : 14] At the heart of the Gospel is the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, he becomes your friend. He becomes your friend.

There's three things I want you to remember about that. One, it means that Jesus does not hesitate to accept you.

Jesus does not hesitate to accept you. The people watching on the dinner and Matthews were like, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners and Jesus says that's exactly who I've come to eat with.

That's exactly who I've come for. And it's an amazing reminder that Jesus does not hesitate to accept you, to love you, and his commitment to you is just, it just stretches out with unchangeable stability over every mistake that you're going to make.

He does not hesitate to accept you. It also means that Jesus will always seek what's best for you.

And I think that that is so often the sign of a true friend, that a friend who will actually tell you the thing that you need to hear, even though you maybe don't want to hear it or maybe it's hard to hear.

[26 : 32] And I think that that's something, that's something that's never easy, but it's so precious.

And Jesus will do that. So God's word by God's spirit will press into your hearts and prick our consciences and question our behavior all for our good, all because Jesus' commitment to us is so strong.

And maybe the thing that you'll find is hardest to believe. And I think this is maybe one of the hardest things to believe in the whole Bible, but it's so important and it is a thousand percent true.

As your friend, Jesus delights in your company. And that's the great image that we have here.

Jesus delighting in the company of people who'd mucked up their lives.

And I think it will be wise and helpful for us to think more. I think we should, we should invent for 2025, we should invent a new theological concept.

[27 : 44] I think we should be thinking about the eschatological significance of friendship. When we talk about eschatology, we're talking about the end times, the future, the return of Jesus and the new heavens and the new earth.

And we should be thinking about the eschatological significance of friendship because reclining at table, which is described here, they lay down, we would sit around a table.

That doesn't matter. Being around a table, having a meal together, being friends, being normal friends is something you see again and again in the Gospels. All of these are the beautiful examples of New Testament first fruits, first fruits of what's to come pointing towards the future and togetherness.

And all of these examples in the New Testament are the first fruits of that. And so in terms of the eschatology of the Gospel in terms of the future, do you know what lies at the heart of that?

Do you know what lies at the very heart of that? Friendship. Beautiful. Friendship with Jesus, with one another, delighting in each other's company.

[28 : 53] In Jesus, we see amazing friendship. So we see compassion, we see authority, we see friendship. Last of all, in Jesus, we see courage. I wanted to pick that because you actually see it in all three of the little sections that we've looked at.

It took massive courage for Jesus to touch that leper because the potential implications were huge if it all went wrong.

It took massive courage to say what he said in front of the religious leaders in that house when they're paralytically before him. The stakes were very high, as we were saying, whether or not the guy was going to get up or not.

And it took courage to go and eat with tax collectors and sinners because everybody was watching, ready to pounce with their criticisms. And again and again and again, you see in Jesus a display of magnificent courage.

Now, often we think, well, you see the courage of Jesus, you think, well, we need to have that courage, and that's true. That's true and important and helpful. We want to emulate Jesus in that way.

[29 : 53] But way more important than that, we recognize that yes, we need to have courage in life, but actually way more important is the fact that we need to be on the receiving end of courage.

We need to be on the receiving end of courage. And the reason that's so important and so true is because so many of the situations where you get hurt or mistreated is because you are on the receiving end of the actions of a coward.

And that'll happen this year. So when you're on the receiving end of people who are being aggressive, people who have been deceptive or manipulative or judgmental or fickle or cruel, people who give you a hard time at school or a boss that's a nightmare at work or a customer who's awful towards you or you've got friends who pick you up and put you down, are they doing that because they're brave?

Of course they're not. They're doing it because they're scared.

But what's there is what fuels the behavior that leaves you bruised and hurt again and again. In Jesus, you see magnificent courage, but with Jesus, we don't just see his courage, we are the beneficiaries of his courage.

[31 : 20] And so with the religious elite who were crushing everybody with guilt, Jesus was not afraid to call in hypocrites. And with people who trusted in him with a childlike faith because they knew that he was their only hope, Jesus was not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

And in all these moments that we've looked at in this passage, Jesus is showing his courage and the rest of the gospel is going to show us even more because the courage of Jesus will take him all the way to the cross.

But on the cross, we don't just admire Jesus' courage and we don't even have to emulate it.

Instead we benefit from it and we can rest in it. Our culture will often tell you that you need to be a fighter, whether that's school at work in terms of fitness, in terms of very helpful, but the gospel is better because the gospel is not telling you to be a fighter, it's telling you that you have been fought for.

And we can marvel at the courage of Jesus who went all the way to the cross to fight for you, to rescue you, and now we can rejoice in his victory.

[32 : 49] As you go into a new year, I want you to think about Jesus and keep thinking about Jesus. I want you to think about his compassion, his gut longing to move towards you with care and love and support.

I want you to think about his authority, that his is the voice that is true and reliable and that will give you a worldview that actually makes sense.

His friendship is forever and he delights in having you near him and his courage took him all the way to the cross so that you could be his.

All of that's for you and it's everything that we need for 2025 and forever.

Amen. Let's pray.