

THE GOSPEL OF
MATTHEW

Part III: Passion and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah
Chapters 16:21-28:20

ASBURY

HOW TO UNDERSTAND MATTHEW PART 3

It is helpful to see Matthew's Gospel as consisting of three main sections:¹

Part 1 – Preparation for Jesus the Messiah [1:1-4:16];

Part 2 – Proclamation of Jesus the Messiah to Israel [4:17-16:20];

Part 3 – Passion and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah [16:21-28:20].

Accordingly, I divided up our reading plan through Matthew into three parts:

- In Part 1 we read about the preparation for Jesus the Messiah: both the origins of Jesus—his genealogy and his infancy—and the events that led up to the launch of his public ministry—the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism and temptation of Jesus in the wilderness;
- In Part 2 we read of the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah to Israel. In both word and deed, Jesus made his identity known, but as he did so he faced increasing opposition from both the religious leaders and the crowds who gathered around him. At the same time, while outside opposition increased, his disciples were given greater and greater knowledge of Jesus and the Kingdom, culminating with Peter's declaration in 16:16,

"You are the Christ,² the Son of the living God."

- In Part 3, we will see what it means that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—namely that he must go to the cross to die and then be raised three days later. All this is foretold and summarized by Jesus as Part 3 begins:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. [16:21]

Matthew 16:21 is the thesis statement for Part 3 and provides its main theme.

¹ I'm indebted to David Bauer for this insight, and recommend his book, *The Gospel of the Son of God: An Introduction to Matthew*.

² "Christ" is the Greek way of saying the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means the "anointed one."

The main theme of the final section of Matthew [16:21-28:20] is that the only way to understand the identity of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God—the only way to understand what he says and what he does—is by looking at the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

And so that's what we're going to do in this third and final section of Matthew's Gospel: we are going to work our way through the final twelve chapters of Matthew, looking closely at what Jesus says and does through the framework of the cross and the empty tomb. What we will see is that central to Jesus's identity—and therefore central to the identity of his subsequent disciples—is self-denial and sacrifice, the giving up of oneself out of obedience to and love for God and love for others. As we read these final chapters and see Jesus prepare for the ultimate sacrifice, I'm going to make two predictions:

1. That we will understand the mission of Jesus more deeply;
2. And that we will see the mission in front of us more clearly.

Let's go.



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P.S. Want to receive these daily readings and commentary each weekday morning in your inbox? Sign up on my website: andrewforrest.org.

P.P.S. Don't miss our final Matthew Bible study in 2023: Wednesday, November 8, 6:30-8:00 PM.

OUR READING PLAN

Like the rest of the Bible, Matthew's Gospel can only be understood through repeated, attentive reading. Accordingly, I've parceled out the readings at a slow pace; each particular day's passage is short and very manageable and it is my hope therefore that you'll have time to go back and re-read a previous day or days and see how it all connects. (The readings are assigned on weekdays only—all the more reason to take your time and read and re-read on the weekends.) We conclude our reading on Friday, December 22.

THE COMMENTARY

Each day I've written some commentary to go with the reading; the commentary is NOT the point—Matthew's words are the point—but I offer the commentary to help you get something out of what you've read each day. Some days I've interspersed the commentary in the midst of the reading, and some days the reading is given in its entirety all at once.

WHAT IS A "GOSPEL"?

"Gospel" is the Old English translation of a Greek word that we transliterate as *euangelion*—pronounced "you-ahng-gell-lee-on"—which means "good news" or "good tidings." You know the story of the Battle of Marathon, how the messenger ran 26 miles to Athens to bring the breathless news of the great Greek victory over the Persians? The message he was bringing was *euangelion*—it is good news about something that has happened in the world. It wasn't originally a religious word, but a political word. In fact, the early Christians adopted it for their purposes because they understood that what had happened with Jesus was news about something amazing that had taken place, that it was (to quote the angel in Luke's Gospel),

"Good news of great joy that will be for all the people!" [Luke 2:10]

This good news was carried from Jerusalem by followers of Jesus all over the world; when it came to the Anglo-Saxon people in what we now call England, the martyrs and missionaries translated it into the tongue of that place, and they called their message "gospel." The early Christians called the Jesus news "gospel," and they also came to call the documents that contained that news "Gospels."

There are four Gospels in our Bibles, and each one gives a slightly different perspective on Jesus. The one we'll be reading through here is the one according to Matthew, i.e., Matthew's Gospel.

WHAT IS A "DISCIPLE"?

The concept of discipleship is important in Matthew. Disciple means student (the Greek word is pronounced math-uh-tase, from which we get our word "mathematics"); or a better English translation might be apprentice. A disciple was someone who was in training to become like the master.

THE TWO KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Matthew's Gospel begins like this:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. [1:1]

And it ends like this:

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." [28:16-20]

Those bookends give us the keys to understanding Matthew.

INTERPRETATIVE KEY #1

Matthew begins by telling us that Jesus is the son of Abraham, i.e., he is the culmination of Israel's story. This means that the entire Old Testament has been leading up to Jesus. **The first key to understanding Matthew is to see everything about Jesus in Matthew's Gospel as connected to and fulfilling the Old Testament story.** In every passage, ask, "How does this information about Jesus relate to the Old Testament story?"

What to Do When You Think You Understand What You're Reading

If you understand a particular passage or episode, *look deeper for the Old Testament connection*—there is more going on that first appears, and the Old Testament connection will greatly broaden your understanding!

What to Do When You Don't Understand What You're Reading

If you don't understand what you're reading, there's a good chance you're missing the Old Testament connection. So, ask yourself, "How does this story fulfill or complete an Old Testament story?"

INTERPRETATIVE KEY #2

Matthew ends by telling us that Jesus's final instructions to his disciples were to teach other people everything Jesus had taught them. Which raises the question, "What did Jesus teach?" The entire Gospel of Matthew is the answer. **Matthew is an instruction manual for discipleship. It is meant to give readers what they need to know to become a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.** So, when you get to the last words of Matthew and the instruction to make disciples, you're forced to go back and start all over again!

The Question to Keep in Mind as You Read

If you were an apprentice to Jesus, what would this passage teach you about following him? Of all the things Matthew *could* have told us, why did he think that we needed to know this to be apprentices of Jesus?

ORDER FOR DAILY PRAYER

In a Bible study or small group?

Use the order below to provide some structure to your gathering.

1. GREETING

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24

2. THE INVITATORY

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

O God, make speed to save us;

O Lord, make haste to help us;

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

3. OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you, no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

4. SCRIPTURE LESSON

The day's scripture is read and briefly expounded.

5. PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory

For ever and ever. Amen

6A. MORNING PRAYER

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day, and we ask that you drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

6B. EVENING PRAYER

O God, the life of all who live, the light of the faithful, the strength of those who labor, and the repose of the dead: We thank you for the blessings of the day that is past, and humbly ask for your protection through the coming night and so thereby bring us in safety to the morning hours. Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all this we pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

7. CLOSING BLESSING

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you;
The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace;
And now may the blessing of God Almighty,
The Father the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
Be with us and remain with us now and forever. Amen.

OCCASIONAL PRAYERS

I have included below some occasional prayers that you may find helpful. Often at a birth or a death I find myself fumbling for the right words to say, and these occasional prayers have been a help to me. (I'd suggest copying to your phone the ones that seem most useful to you, so you can easily text them to others when the need arises.)

A GRACE BEFORE MEALS

Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

or

Blessed are you, O Lord God, King of the Universe, for you give us food to sustain our lives and make our hearts glad; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR OUR NATION

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage: We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure conduct. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom, in thy Name, we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all of which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR A BIRTHDAY

O God, our times are in your hand: Look with favor, we pray, on your servant *N.* as *he* begins another year. Grant that *he* may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen *his* trust in your goodness all the days of *his* life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR A CHILD, OR FOR A BIRTHDAY

Watch over your child *N.*, O Lord, as *his* days increase; bless *him* and guide *him*, and keep *him* unspotted from the world. Strengthen *him* when *he* stands; comfort *him* when discouraged or sorrowful; raise *him* up if *he* falls; and in *his* heart may your peace which passes understanding abide all the days of *his* life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR A MARRIAGE OR ANNIVERSARY

O God, you have so consecrated the covenant of marriage that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church: Send your blessing upon these your servants [as they begin another year], that they may so love, honor, and cherish each other in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

A THANKSGIVING PRAYER

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side. We thank you for setting us at tasks that demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments that satisfy and delight us. We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone. Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he conquered death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom. Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know Christ and make him known; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. Amen.

FOR OUR ENEMIES

O God, the Creator of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you in Jesus Christ; in whose Name we pray. Amen.

FOR THE RECOVERY OF A SICK PERSON

O God, the strength of the weak and the comfort of sufferers: Mercifully accept our prayers, and grant to your servant *N.* the help of your power, that *his* sickness may be turned into health, and our sorrow into joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

AT THE TIME OF DEATH

Rest eternal grant to *N.*, O Lord; and may *his* soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace and in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection. Amen.

FOR DESIRING GOD

O God, grant that we may desire you, and desiring you seek you, and seeking you find you, and finding you be satisfied in you forever. Amen.

FOR A PERSON IN TROUBLE OR BEREAVEMENT

O merciful Father, you have taught us in your holy Word that you do not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men: Look with pity on the sorrows of your servant *N*. Remember *him*, O Lord, in mercy; nourish *his* soul with patience; comfort *him* with a sense of your goodness; lift up your countenance upon *him*; and give *him* peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR THE DISCOURAGED AND DOWNCAST

O God, almighty and merciful, you heal the broken-hearted, and turn the sadness of the sorrowful to joy: Let your fatherly goodness be upon all whom you have made. Remember in pity all those who are this day destitute, homeless, elderly, infirm, or forgotten. Bless the multitude of your poor. Lift up those who are cast down. Mightily befriend innocent sufferers, and sanctify to them the endurance of their wrongs. Cheer with hope all who are discouraged and downcast, and by your heavenly grace preserve from falling those whose poverty tempts them to sin. Though they be troubled on every side, suffer them not to be distressed; though they are perplexed, save them from despair. Grant this, O Lord, for the love of him who for our sakes became poor, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

FOR HELP TO BEAR BEREAVEMENT

Heavenly Father, help us to entrust our loved ones to your care. Though sorrow darkens our lives, help us to look up to you, remembering the cloud of witnesses by which we are surrounded. And grant that we on earth, rejoicing ever in your presence, may share with them the rest and peace which your presence gives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR QUIET CONFIDENCE

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(I've selected these prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer*.)

MONDAY, OCTOBER 30

MATTHEW 16:21-28

ONE SENTENCE SUMMARY OF THE ENTIRE PLOT OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

²¹From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

This third and final section of Matthew's Gospel begins with a one-sentence summary from Jesus of all that will happen:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. [16:21]

This verse is a thesis statement and a prediction of all that will follow. But when Jesus begins to tell the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him.

Why?

Because Peter wants to believe that salvation is possible without suffering and he misunderstands that for Jesus to be faithful to his mission he will have to suffer and die.

Jesus knows that suffering is inevitable, and I think the reason he reacts so strongly to Peter—"Get behind me, Satan!"—is precisely because the main temptation Jesus faces is the temptation to seek the

crown without the cross. (Remember the testing in the wilderness in chapter 4.) Jesus doesn't need Peter speaking the devil's words into his ear—the way of the cross is difficult enough.

Things haven't changed. Suffering is part of life, and the faithful will suffer. The Cross comes before the Crown. Good Friday comes before Easter Sunday.

But of course, if suffering is part of life—and I'm certain that it is—that means that you will suffer if you choose faithfulness, *and* you will suffer if you don't choose faithfulness: *both* the faithful and the unfaithful suffer. The question is, will we suffer because we are walking the Way of Jesus, or because we are trying to seek our own way? Both ways are difficult, but only one way leads to life.

The sacrifice is worth it.

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."
[16:24-25]

Which way are you going to choose today?

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31

MATTHEW 17:1-13

THE TRANSFIGURATION

17 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” ¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹¹ He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

The spiritual world is very near—even now at hand—and all around, and yet it is also inaccessible to us by normal human senses. The spiritual world is invisible, but it is there. From time to time, God permits us to experience the spiritual world, but those times are rare this side of the grave, like seeing a snow leopard or Halley’s Comet.

Peter, James, and John are given one of those rare glimpses of the spiritual world on the Mount of Transfiguration.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. [17:1-3]

They see Jesus as he is in the spiritual world—glorious and radiant. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he humbled himself and became as we are, but on the Mount of Transfiguration, his glory was unmasked.

Peter has just been telling Jesus that he won’t have to go to the cross, but here the Father tells the disciples that they need to pay attention to what Jesus has been saying:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” [17:5]

Why does Jesus tell them not to tell anyone else about what they saw on the mountain until after the Resurrection? Because Jesus’s identity as the Son of God can only be understood *after* the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the problem Jesus faces is that everyone—even his disciples—misunderstands the nature of his mission. Peter has

correctly identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God [16:16], but now Jesus needs to show his disciples *what it means* that he is the Christ and the Son of God.

As we read along, we need to let the words and actions of Jesus define “Christ” and “Son of God” for us. Keep your eyes open!

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1

MATTHEW 17:14-23

IMAGINE TWO PEOPLE CROSSING A BRIDGE

¹⁴ And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵ said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. ¹⁶ And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.” ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁰ He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Jesus Again Foretells Death, Resurrection

²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed.

Imagine two people crossing a bridge over a chasm. It’s a long way down to the river below, and a fall would be fatal. One person has a great deal of faith that the bridge will hold him up; the other person is terrified that the bridge will collapse.

Question: which person’s faith will matter more?

Answer: it’s a trick question! **It is irrelevant how much faith in the bridge each person has. All that matters is the reality of the**

structural integrity of the bridge, and if the two people actually step out on it and try to cross.

What matters is not the amount of faith a person has—what matters is the object of that faith and whether that object is trustworthy or not.

If I have complete faith in a rickety bridge that collapses as soon as I step on it, then my faith is misplaced. If I have a tiny amount of faith in a bridge that can support my weight, then my faith is validated. But in either case, the *amount* of faith I have doesn't matter at all.

Jesus makes the above point to the disciples in the episode of the boy with the demon. He tells them that even a little bit of faith in him is enough, because he's the one they need to trust, not themselves. Trusting in themselves will not be effective.

Where are you placing your trust today?

P.S. We see again in 17:22-23 that Jesus is defining what faithfulness to his mission will entail: perfect obedience to the will of God, even to the point of humiliation, suffering, and death, obedience that will then be vindicated by the resurrection. And the disciples refuse to accept what he's telling them!

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2

MATTHEW 17:24-27

CATCHING FISH WITH COINS IN THE MOUTHS

²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" ²⁵ He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" ²⁶ And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷ However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

I'll admit, this is a strange story. The first part is straight-forward enough: Jesus thinks that though he doesn't actually have to pay

the Temple tax, he will do so, so as to not cause an unnecessary problem. This is what it means to be the Son of God—not insisting on your rights, but living to serve others.

What happens next is startling:

“Go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.” [17:27]

What are we to make of that? I thought this comment from Stanley Hauerwas was helpful:

“Christians rightly desire to do great things in service to God and in service to the world. But too often Christians think such service must insure the desired outcome. We simply do not believe that we can risk fishing for a fish with a coin in its mouth. Yet no account of the Christian desire to live at peace with our neighbor, who may also be our enemy, is intelligible if Christians no longer trust that God can and will help us catch fish with coins in their mouths. No account of Christian nonviolence is intelligible that does not require, as well as depend on, miracle. Christian discipleship entails our trusting that God has given and will continue to give all that we need to be faithful.”

—Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew

Yes. The Jesus Way requires that we trust God’s constant provision. Where do you need to depend on God’s provision today?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3

MATTHEW 18:1-14

CHILDREN AREN’T IMPORTANT

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

⁷“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

¹⁰“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹²What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

This idea that children are sweet and innocent and valuable is a modern idea. In the ancient world, children were overlooked and unimportant. It is the influence of 2,000 years of Christian teaching that accounts for our culture's belief in the inherent value and importance of children. The reason this is important is because it is easy for us to misunderstand when Jesus talks about children. From today's scripture passage:

²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. [18:2-4]

The picture Jesus gives is not one of sweet sentimentality, but of humiliation: children were the unimportant, overlooked ones. They were the lowest of the low. So, to become like a child, then, is to become someone truly humble.

The next time you feel overlooked, ignored, or unimportant, remember: those who are overlooked, ignored, and unimportant are the people who are great in the Kingdom. A taste of humiliation can be used by God to prepare our character for the Kingdom. Also, that slight taste of humiliation is a gift from God, in that it enables us to share in the much greater humiliation of Christ.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6

MATTHEW 18:15-20

HOW TO DEAL WITH SIN IN THE CHURCH

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Imagine if, with regard to sex abuse in the church, that Pope Francis came out and said, “Stop being so judgmental: sex abuse is not that big of a deal.” Can you imagine the furor that would justifiably result? Why? Because we know that sin *actually hurts people*. Imagine if I, as a pastor, continued to employ someone who was stealing from the offering plate. Our church members would be justifiably angry with me.

The most frequent complaint outsiders make against the church is that it is filled with hypocrites; in other words, the problem outsiders see in the church is that Christians are not holy enough. Sin is a problem.

Today's passage shows Jesus takes sin in his church seriously and gives practical steps we can follow to confront sin in our midst *for the good of the sinners themselves*. Of course, it is the case that we ourselves are sinners, but that doesn't absolve us of the responsibility

to lovingly confront active sin. The goal is to “gain your brother” [v. 15], that is to have reconciliation between people. But, if someone persists in unrepentant sin, then you may have to cut off relations with that person. Such decisions are serious and God has given his church great responsibility. Note the emphasis of Jesus here on what we today call *due process*: he instructs his disciples to proceed with evidence when he says. “take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” [18:16]. But, in the hard work of confronting sin, the church should take comfort that Jesus will be with them and will guide them.

To whom can you seek reconciliation today? With whom do you need to have an honest conversation?

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7

MATTHEW 18:21-35

HOW TO KNOW THAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND FORGIVENESS

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’

³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the

jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

The basic plot of this parable is easy to follow:

- A king forgives servant A an outrageous sum—the equivalent of millions and millions of dollars in today’s currency;
- Servant A then refuses to forgive a much smaller debt that servant B owes servant A;
- The king finds out and has servant A thrown in jail and tortured!
- Then, Jesus sums up the parable:

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” [18:35]

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THIS STRANGE PARABLE

Remember, context matters: this parable comes at the end of an entire chapter (Matthew 18) on how to live together as the church. Verses 1-5 are about who is great in the kingdom, with the focus on humility. Verses 6-9 focus on temptations to sin. Verses 10-14 tell the Lost Sheep parable. Verses 15-20 talk about dealing with sin inside the church community. Verses 21-22 talk about forgiveness. Verses 23-35 tell the parable of the Unmerciful Servant. The central theme is verses 15-20---sin in the church--and the rest of the chapter is explanation and commentary on that theme.

Living together in the church will require humility; God will pursue sinners at great expense; sin in the church must be dealt with; we will need to forgive others over and over again; but, forgiveness should produce a response in us. The Way of the Cross—self-denial and sacrifice and obedience—shapes this entire section.

I like how Klyne Snodgrass puts it:

“This text is a clear example of the tension between two or more truths that are always present in Christian theology. The community cannot tolerate sin without confrontation and reproof, but must always love and forgive without limits.... The parable prevents any presuming on grace. The church has

often presented a grace that did not have to be taken seriously, but biblical grace is transforming grace. When you get the gift, you get the Giver, who will not let you go your way."

—Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*

Discipleship Produces Obedience

Professor Snodgrass goes on to say:

"Neither Matthew nor Jesus is legalistic, neither promotes salvation by works... but both insist that discipleship includes obedience."

Forgiveness is limitless, but it can't be presumed, and shouldn't be wasted. If forgiveness doesn't change us, we haven't really understood our need for it anyway. Jesus is not a sentimental Santa Claus; people prattle on about how loving Jesus is--which is true--but he is a giver who has a hard edge, and he demands a response, which you see *if you actually read the Gospels*.

Saving faith is obedient faith, and he has commanded us to forgive those who trespass against us.

Whom do you need to forgive today?

TONIGHT IS OUR LAST CHURCHWIDE BIBLE STUDY OF 2023!
WED, NOV 8 | 6:30 PM | SANCTUARY
LIVESTREAM: asburytulsa.online.church

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 8

MATTHEW 19:1-12

CONTROVERSIAL AND HARD TEACHING ON MARRIAGE,
DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE

19 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ² And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” ¹¹ But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

INTRODUCTION--JESUS IS NOT SANTA CLAUS

Haven't you ever wondered why, since Jesus was such a nice guy, meek and mild; since Jesus is basically Santa Claus in sandals and a bath robe; since Jesus never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings—*haven't you ever wondered why Jesus was killed?* Jesus wasn't killed by accident; Jesus was killed because the things he did and said caused people to *hate* him.

Matthew chapters 19-20 are a good example of the sort of things Jesus said that got him killed, because these two chapters contain some difficult, *explosive* teachings from Jesus. The sacrifice of the cross shapes all the teaching in this section, and to properly understand Matthew 19-20, we need to look at all of Jesus's teachings in this section together and see how self-denial and sacrifice characterize life in the Kingdom.

JESUS, MARRIAGE, & DIVORCE

In Matthew 19, Jesus speaks to the topic of marriage and divorce. In today's commentary, I am not going to offer a comprehensive theology of marriage and divorce, and there are lots of questions I'm not going to try to answer; what I *will* try to do is explain what I think Jesus is saying in this passage. So, let's walk through this passage, verse by verse:

19 *Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ²And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.*

³And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [19:1-3]

Jesus has now begun his journey to Jerusalem. He's left the Galilee in the north, and has come south. Unsurprisingly, he has drawn a crowd. And, equally unsurprisingly, the Pharisees--who hate Jesus--have come to try to trip him up. Some things haven't changed; even today, talking about marriage can get you crucified!

The question about divorce is not an earnest, truth-seeking question, because the Pharisees who ask it are trying to set a trap for Jesus. Why is this question so controversial? In the time of Jesus, there were two rabbinical perspectives on divorce: one perspective (from Rabbi Hillel) said that men could divorce their wives for any reason, and the other perspective (from Rabbi Shammai) said that divorce should be reserved for cases of adultery. In both cases, it was understood that only a husband could seek a divorce, and not a wife. Unsurprisingly, the Hillel perspective was the popular one in the time of Jesus.

As he always does, Jesus uses scripture to frame his answer. In fact, he goes back to the very beginning of the Bible itself: Genesis 1-2. (Specifically Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.)

⁴He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ ⁶So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” [19:4-6]

Note that Jesus doesn't actually answer their question directly, but instead talks about the purpose of marriage, as designed by God. There are 4 interesting implications to his answer:

1. Our identities as male or female are not an accident, but part of God's purpose for our lives.
2. Marriage makes new families. The husband comes from one family, the wife comes from another, but when they get married, a brand-new family is created through them.
3. The marriage union is meant to be total: in the biblical language, "one flesh." Marriage is a complete union: emotional, of course, but also, in some mysterious way, bodily as well. The physical result of that bodily union, obviously, is a child. A child is the "one flesh" that results when a husband and a wife come together through sexual intercourse. A child is one, though it comes from two: a mother and a father. Even at the molecular level, this is true: the child has one DNA sequence, but that sequence has been made from the DNA of two parents. There are billions of us on this planet, and every single one of us--without exception, and whether we know them personally or not--has a biological mother and a biological father. The fact that each of us is the fruit of our parents' union is really astounding, but because it is commonplace, we overlook it.
4. The marriage union is meant to be lifelong—that was God's design from the very beginning.

The Pharisees reply with an obvious point:

⁷They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” [19:7]

In other words, they say: "Jesus, that sounds really nice, but if marriage was meant to be life-long, why is divorce sanctioned in the

Old Testament?" (Divorce is really only mentioned once in the Mosaic Law—Deuteronomy 24:1-4. And there it's not the grounds for divorce that are mentioned, but rather what happens *after* divorce.)

⁸ *He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."* [19:8-9]

The presence of sin has made divorce necessary. Rebellious attitudes toward God—"because of your hardness of heart"—meant that marriage's original purpose would not always be realized, and so divorce is a consequence that God gives to contain the damage caused by sin—divorce is necessary so as not to make things worse. There are laws regarding how to deal with murder, e.g., but those laws about what to do with murderers only exist *because* people have already chosen to do murder. In the same way, laws about divorce arise as a consequence of human sin.

Jesus then states that sexual immorality breaks the marriage covenant or somehow makes marriage impossible. In that case, then, divorce is a way of acknowledging that the marriage covenant has already been abrogated.

It is important to point out that since it seems that only men who were able to divorce their wives in the time of Jesus (and not vice versa), then the practical effect of Jesus's comments is that they protect women, who, without clear divorce laws, could be cast aside for any and every reason. Jesus's words sound harsh, but they are *actually* helpful to women whose husbands wanted to divorce them for any and every reason.

The disciples are shocked at the implications of Jesus's words:

¹⁰ *The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."* [19:10]

At the time of Jesus, the expectation for everyone was marriage and family. The disciples say that if marriage is supposed to be that kind of permanent union, then maybe some people shouldn't even get married!

In response, Jesus says that there are some people God has called to celibacy and not marriage, but celibacy is not a calling for *everyone*, “but only those to whom it is given.”

“But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.’¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” [19:11-12]

A “eunuch” is a man who has been castrated so that he is unable to reproduce sexually. Eunuchs were present in the ancient world from the Middle East to China and they were often important members of a royal household; because they were obviously unable to found their own dynasties, they were often entrusted with important matters of state. To the Jews of Jesus’s day, to be a eunuch was to be in a place of humiliation. Jesus is—once again—using a striking image to make his point.

Note what Jesus is saying:

- Some people are, from birth, unable (or unwilling?) to procreate: “eunuchs who have been so from birth.”
- Some people will not be able to procreate because their bodies have been mutilated by others: “eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men.”
- Some people will *choose* not to marry and instead live a life of celibacy because they are being obedient to a particular call from God on their lives: “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” (Here, “eunuch” is a metaphor for celibacy.) Jesus himself is in this 3rd category, since he never married.

This entire passage is extremely counter-cultural today, and was extremely counter-cultural in Jesus’s day as well.

This teaching of Jesus flies in the face of our divorce culture. Since Governor Ronald Reagan signed the nation’s first no-fault divorce law into effect in California in 1969, we have come to accept (not only in

law, but in our understanding) that marriage is something that either party can end for any reason whatsoever, and once divorce papers are filed, then the marriage is over. Jesus says that, in effect, marriage is more durable than that, and that regardless of what the papers say, marriage can't be ended as easily as that, because in marriage a husband and a wife are “joined” into *one*. (In Greek, the word implies “glued” or “welded” into one.) This is a radical teaching.

The words of Jesus on divorce will seem radical to our culture, but his words on sex will seem INSANE. Our culture believes that a fulfilling and happy life must include sex. Think about our advertising--it's not that our advertisers use sex to sell things--though they do--it's that they also imply that a life without sex is a life not worth living. Jesus flatly contradicts this implication. In fact, he suggests that some people *will choose not to marry and have sex and make these choices out of service to the kingdom of heaven*.

As for other conclusions, I will let you think on these issues yourself. This is just one passage in all of Matthew's Gospel, which is but one book in the entire Bible—on marriage and divorce, we need to take the whole counsel of scripture.

But, remember that the Way of Jesus is the way of self-denial and sacrifice *and it is the way that leads to life*.

So, this is a hard teaching on sex, marriage, and divorce and Jesus's words fly in the face of what American culture teaches about these things, but let me ask, *How's it working out for us apart from Jesus? Has the sexual revolution since 1960 brought us more happiness, or more misery?*

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9

MATTHEW 19:13-30

WILL JESUS EVER TURN SOMEONE AWAY?

¹³ Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴ but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” ¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went away.

¹⁶ And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸ He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰ The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" ²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³ And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." ²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

I don't think we ever see Jesus turn someone away. But, what we do see are people who refuse what he has to offer. The story of the rich young ruler is a good example of this: he asks Jesus how to have eternal life, and Jesus answers him honestly. Jesus tells him that his possessions will make it very hard for him to receive the kingdom. The man doesn't want to hear that, and walks away sad.

Jesus calls every person to follow him, but we come on his terms, not our own. There are many people in the Gospels and in our time who aren't willing to accept the terms Jesus gives. Wealth is obviously a major stumbling block for us, because when we are wealthy it's much harder for us to trust Jesus first. But, wealth is not the only stumbling block in a person's life—if we want to follow Jesus, we will have to follow in the way of self-denial and sacrifice.

But Jesus tells his disciples that it will be worth it:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.” [19:29]

So, here's the question: **what is the thing that's keeping you from following Jesus today?**

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10

MATTHEW 20:1-16

THE MOST EXPLOSIVE PARABLE IN THE BIBLE?

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICES

I remember the first time I really *heard* the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. I was in seminary, and it was the first time I understood

the explosive nature of the teaching of Jesus. This parable does not make you feel good, and the more you think about it, the more disturbing it seems. It just seems fundamentally unfair that the people who have labored all day in the hot sun get paid the same as those who only put in an hour of work at the close of the day.

Maybe that's the point: there is something about the kingdom of heaven that just doesn't fit with how we think things should be. And, considering what a mess we've made of things, maybe that's very good news.

Peter has implied that Jesus owes them for following him:

"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"
[19:27]

Jesus explains that though God will reward as he has promised, he will also be abundantly generous as he sees fit:

"I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"
[20:14-15]

Toward whom can you be abundantly generous today?

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13

MATTHEW 20:17-28

JAMES AND JOHN HAVE THEIR MOM TALK TO THE TEACHER

¹⁷ And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸ "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹ And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." ²² Jesus answered, "You do not know what you

are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." ²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The disciples still refuse to understand the Way of the Cross—they seek worldly status and hierarchy.

"Jesus insists that in the kingdom the issue of position and status is turned on its head. In contrast to the thinking of the Gentiles, who will finally kill him...it is those who most abjectly reject positions of honor and status in favor of humble submission to the needs of others who will have the greatest status in the kingdom, for this is the essential model of Jesus' whole life, culminating in his death; he came 'not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mt 20:28)."

—David Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God*

Is there a small act of quiet service you can perform for someone else today?

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14

MATTHEW 20:29-34

WHAT DO YOU WANT JESUS TO DO FOR YOU?

²⁹And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. ³⁰And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³²And stopping, Jesus called them and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³³They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be

opened.”³⁴ And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

I love the directness of Jesus's question to the two blind men in Jericho:

"What do you want me to do for you?" [20:32]

To their credit, they are bold in their request:

"Lord,' they answered, 'we want our sight.'" [20:33]

And they receive it. Jesus is humble and has time for beggars.

If Jesus asked you that same question today, what would you say?

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 15

MATTHEW 21:1-11

WHEN IT'S TIME TO FIGHT

2I Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples,² saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me."³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵ "Say to the daughter of Zion,
'Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.' "

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them.⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of

the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” ¹⁰ And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” ¹¹ And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

The Mount of Olives overlooks Jerusalem to the east, and on Palm Sunday Jesus comes down the Mount of Olives in a triumphant procession as he enters the city. The excitement around Jesus has been slowly coming to a boil, but each time the lid is about to blow off, Jesus calms the crowds, or quickly withdraws, or tells the people not to say anything. Palm Sunday, however, is the moment when Jesus goes public. He encourages the shouts of Hosanna and the waving of the palm branches; his procession is a deliberately provocative and political act. And, just a few days later, he'll be crucified.

So, why does he do it?

I think the answer is that it's finally time for him to engage the fight. Jesus was born to die. Up to this moment, he has been biding his time. Now that the time has come, he's ready.

At some point, the difficult thing can't be avoided--it must be engaged.

P.S. Jesus is the son of David [1:1] who finally claims David's city—Jerusalem—as king, and for a brief time on that first Palm Sunday, the people correctly acknowledge his identity [21:9].

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 16

MATTHEW 21:12-17

THE REASON JESUS OVERTURNED THE TABLES

¹² And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³ He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

¹⁴ And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the

temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant,¹⁶ and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

“ ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise’?”

¹⁷ And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

The reason there were moneychangers and merchants in the temple courts in Jerusalem was so that pilgrims who came in from far away could easily buy an animal for sacrifice. Galilee is in the north of Israel, e.g., and I'm told it was at least a two week walk from there to Jerusalem. Obviously, it wasn't practical for Jews coming to worship and sacrifice in Jerusalem to bring animals with them, and the Jews of the Diaspora wouldn't even have the appropriate currency with them, hence the need for the moneychangers.

So, I don't think it is the presence of the moneychangers and the merchants that is necessarily wrong; it is their abuse of their position to which Jesus is objecting. If they had offered a fair rate of exchange and fair prices, then they would have been doing the pilgrims a service. But, it seems they were price-gouging, and thereby profaning the Temple.

P.S. Unlike the adults, the children in Jerusalem understand who Jesus is.

P.P.S. The overturning of the tables in the Temple courts is a profoundly provocative act, and one that leads directly to Jesus's death.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17

MATTHEW 21:18-27

WHY DID JESUS CURSE THE FIG TREE?

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” ²¹ And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

A fruitless fig tree was an Old Testament symbol of God's judgment on Israel's idolatry and corruption. For example:

*“I will take away their harvest,
declares the Lord.
There will be no grapes on the vine.
There will be no figs on the tree,
and their leaves will wither.
What I have given them
will be taken from them.”* [Jeremiah 8:13, NIV]

So, the episode with the cursed fig tree is a living parable Jesus is acting out in front of the disciples. He is showing them the consequences for the hard-heartedness of the religious leaders, namely that the Temple will soon be destroyed.

At the time Jesus is speaking the Temple and its leadership would have seemed permanent and unassailable. And yet within a generation (in AD 70) the entire thing would be overthrown as a consequence of Israel's rejection of Jesus. (Look at the leadership's dishonesty in verses 23-27.) Jesus wants his disciples to have faith that God hears their prayers and can do the seemingly impossible.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20

MATTHEW 21:28-46

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS AND THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

²⁸ “What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

³³ “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“ ‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS (MATTHEW 21:28-32)

"God requires productive and obedient living from his people....

How did people ever get the idea that obedience to the will of God is optional?... Any separation of believing and doing is a distortion of the gospel message and is directly confronted by this parable. A person cannot believe apart from obedience....

"This parable also encourages us to remember that initial responses are not ultimate responses. An initial refusal does not have to stay a refusal, and an initial agreement is not enough. It must be lived."

—Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*

THE PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS (MATTHEW 21:33-46)

This is a parable of judgment against the Jewish religious leaders, who will lose what they have because of their wicked refusal to listen to the Son of God.

This parable is also a challenge to each of us: what are we doing with the spiritual potential God has given us? Are we laboring in the Kingdom to produce more fruit, or are we just wasting its potential? Don't be deceived—Jesus says that we will each be held accountable for our actions.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21

MATTHEW 22:1-14

THE WEDDING CRASHER

22 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³ and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and

everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”⁵ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business,⁶ while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.⁸ Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.⁹ Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’¹⁰ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment.¹² And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless.¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

This is a very difficult, troubling parable, and it will offend our modern sensibilities.

So, is the problem Jesus, or are we the problem?

Essentially, this is a parable about the necessity of responding to God’s invitation of the Kingdom. And if you do respond, you must do so on God’s terms, not your own. **What is keeping you from completely responding today to the invitation of Jesus? What do you need to leave behind?**

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22

MATTHEW 22:15-22

JESUS IS THE SMARTEST PERSON WHO EVER LIVED

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?¹⁹ Show me

the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.²⁰ And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”²¹ They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Jesus is really smart. Like brilliant! Like the smartest-man-who-ever-lived kind of smart. (This is one of the reasons the early church called him “Lord.”) Most people today wouldn’t think of Jesus as being in even the top 10 smartest people who ever lived, but he is.

To cite a tiny example, consider his response to the Pharisees and the Herodians about paying taxes “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” It is a GENIUS answer, and even his enemies admitted this:

“When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.” [22:22]

“[D]espite the countercultural character of the kingdom that rejects the ultimacy of the social structures of this present world (Mt 4:18-22; 10:34-39), life in the kingdom involves fulfilling the obligation to pay taxes (Mt 22:15-22) and thus offer support for the proper functions of government.”

—David Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God*

Jesus is brilliant. And there is nothing about your circumstances that bewilder him today--he is completely competent to get you through life, all the way to the other side.

Trust him.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23

MATTHEW 22:23-33

IS THERE MARRIAGE IN HEAVEN?

²³The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, ²⁴saying, “Teacher,

Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.' ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ So too the second and third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ After them all, the woman died. ²⁸ In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her."

²⁹ But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

Happy Thanksgiving! This prayer might be useful to you today:

A THANKSGIVING PRAYER

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side. We thank you for setting us at tasks that demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments that satisfy and delight us. We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone. Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he conquered death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom. Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know Christ and make him known; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. Amen.

I heard Tim Mackie make two points about today's reading that I found helpful.

First, the Sadducees were the religious elite who controlled the chief priest's position in Jerusalem. (They were not natural allies of the

Pharisees.) Tim Mackie compared them to Scientologists today: a relatively small group made up of wealthy people.

Second, what about Jesus saying there is no marriage in heaven? That seems sad--does that mean we'll have no families in heaven? Tim Mackie pointed out that we have umbilical cords for the first few months of life, and we absolutely need them. Then, after we are born, we no longer need what seemed so essential to us before. In some way, this is what marriage is like: it's necessary here on earth, but will give way to something better in heaven. If I'm honest, I don't really understand that or like it, but I need to remember that God's plans are always better for us than anything we could have thought of ourselves.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24

MATTHEW 22:34-40

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Everything in the Old Testament is about love for God and love for neighbor, and everything Jesus teaches in Matthew is based on that Great Commandment.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27

MATTHEW 22:41-46

WHO IS THE CHRIST?

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, ⁴² saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ " 'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet" '?"

⁴⁵ If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" ⁴⁶ And no one was

able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

We've been told from the first verse of Matthew's Gospel that Jesus is the "son of David" [1:1]. Here, Jesus doesn't dispute that fact, but using Psalm 110 he proves to the Pharisees that though the Messiah is the son of David, he is also greater than David, because David calls him "Lord."

This argument marks the end of his debate with the religious leaders of Jerusalem, and the final chapters of Matthew show us what it means that Jesus is the Messiah: namely that in perfect obedience to the will of God, Jesus will go to the cross to die, and that his obedience will then be vindicated by the resurrection.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28

MATTHEW 23:1-12

NOT FOLLOWING MY OWN STANDARDS

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus has talked many times in Matthew's Gospel about the problem of hypocrisy, of not practicing what you preach. Here, he again takes the Pharisees to task, not for what they say--he says "You must be careful to do everything they tell you"--but for what they say and don't do—they don't follow their own advice.

If Jesus talks about this so often, it must be important. So, here's

the question:

Where today am I not living up to my own principles? How am I not practicing what I preach?

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29

MATTHEW 23:13-39

THE WOES

¹³ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

¹⁶ “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also

outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

³⁷ “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, “who will save his people from their sins” [1:21]. In the very first verse of the Gospel we’re told that he is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” [1:1]. He is Israel’s promised king, and he is the descendant of Abraham through whom blessing will come to the entire world. But the sad story of Israel is that God’s chosen people have been rebellious and unfaithful, and in this terrifying speech Jesus connects Israel’s past unrighteousness with the unrighteousness he is facing from the Pharisees, and he predicts disaster for the Jews in v. 36.

Jesus then says that until and unless Israel accepts him as Messiah—*“For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* [23:39]—destruction will be the result.

And that’s what happened: the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70, and it hasn’t been rebuilt since.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30

MATTHEW 24:1-2

THE CONSEQUENCE FOR ISRAEL OF REJECTING JESUS

24 Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

What Jesus predicts here is actually what happened: the Temple in Jerusalem--a stunning architectural and engineering achievement--was pulled down, stone by stone, by the Romans in AD 70.

Why did God permit the destruction of the Temple? Because Israel refused to accept Jesus as Messiah and instead—in the generation after Jesus—preferred to seek military salvation by trying to overthrow the Roman empire. That action provoked vicious Roman retaliation, retaliation that included the destruction of the Temple. Jesus foresaw all that would happen.

How painful it must have been for him to know what was going to happen and yet still see his people stubbornly persist in the way that was leading to destruction.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1

MATTHEW 24:3-44

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE AND THE END OF THE WORLD

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

¹⁵ "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

²

⁹ "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the

days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Jesus has just predicted that the Temple would be destroyed:

24 *Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”* [24:1-2]

So, when they are alone on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem proper, his disciples naturally ask him,

“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” [24:3]

In the verses that follow, Jesus gives a long answer to both questions. It's important to keep in mind, then, that Jesus is answering two different questions here:

1. When will the literal Temple be destroyed?
 2. What signs of his Second Coming should his followers be looking for?
-

The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, just as Jesus here predicted, but his Second Coming has not yet occurred.

With regard to question #1, Jesus tells his disciples what to be watching for before the Temple is destroyed. He gives them clear signs to expect.

With regard to question #2, Jesus makes it clear that the destruction of the Temple is not the same thing as his Second Coming and the “end of the age.” In fact, he says that there will not be signs presaging his return, but that the Second Coming when it arrives will come suddenly, like the floods in Noah’s day [24:37-42]. Because there aren’t signs,

“[t]herefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” [24:44]

What does it look like to be ready? Jesus tells three parables that illustrate what readiness looks like. Read on to find out.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

MATTHEW 24:45-51; 25:1-13

TWO PARABLES OF PREPARATION

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also,

saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The Boy Scout Motto: “Be Prepared.”

In speaking of the Second Coming, Jesus tells his disciples to be vigilant and prepared [24:44]. He then tells three parables illustrating what it means for his disciples to be ready.

The Parable of The Unfaithful Servant and the Parable of the Ten Virgins are the first two parables in the series of three about preparation.

What do you think Jesus is telling us about preparation by giving us these two parables?

We must not assume that because Jesus has not yet returned that he won’t ever return—rather we must exercise constant obedience so we can always be ready for his return.

Are you ready today? What have you been putting off? Don’t delay—you don’t know how much time you have.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

MATTHEW 25:14-30

YOU’LL GET WHAT YOU EXPECT

¹⁴ “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ ²¹ His master said

to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

In speaking of the Second Coming, Jesus tells his disciples to be vigilant and prepared [24:44]. He then tells three parables illustrating what it means for his disciples to be ready.

The Parable of the Talents is the third parable of the three.

Compare the way the one-talent servant views the master with the way the master actually behaves:

- The one-talent servant thinks the master is "a hard man;"
- Whereas the master is actually really generous and joyful.

If people are convinced that the Lord is cruel and hard, it will be very hard for them to accept his gracious gifts. This is what Jesus means when he says,

"For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."
[25:29]

If you believe God is gracious and good, you'll be open to receive more goodness and grace. If you are convinced God is cruel and hard, Jesus implies that at the end, you'll get exactly what you expect.

How can you be more intentional today with the opportunities God has given you?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

MATTHEW 25:31-46

THE LAST JUDGMENT

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Did you notice the terrifying detail in Jesus's description of the Last Judgment?

Both groups are surprised by what the master says to them.

The reaction of the righteous:

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' [25:37-39]

And the reaction of the unrighteous:

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' [25:44]

In other words, neither the righteous nor the unrighteous are aware of whom they have become. Over time, their habitual actions in either direction have become part of who they are to the extent that they aren't aware of them anymore.

We are becoming what we're doing. Each choice is making us. (And we're not even aware of it.)

What choices are you making today?

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

MATTHEW 26:1-16

JUDAS AND THE WOMAN WITH THE PERFUME

26 When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ²“You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.”

³Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵But they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.”

⁶Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. ⁸And

when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? ⁹ For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” ¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Judas was hand-picked by Jesus, saw Jesus do spectacular miracles, heard Jesus teach in a way no one has ever taught before or since, and still: Judas agreed to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. In fact, the religious leaders have resolved not to arrest Jesus during the Passover festival, but Judas’s betrayal gives them their opportunity.

If even Jesus was betrayed by someone he loved, why are we surprised when it happens to us?

Unlike Judas, the unnamed woman in Simon’s house extravagantly anoints Jesus as king and anoints his body in the only anointing he will receive before burial. She is a model of faithful discipleship.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

MATTHEW 26:17-29

THE MEANING OF THE LAST SUPPER

¹⁷ Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?” ¹⁸ He said, “Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’” ¹⁹ And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

²⁰ When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. ²¹ And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" ²³ He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me." ²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." ²⁵ Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

I find it fascinating that, when Jesus says at the Last Supper that one of the disciples will betray him, each of them asks in response, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?"

I wrote yesterday that if even Jesus can be betrayed by someone he loves, then it can happen to any of us.

But it's also true that any of us could be the betrayer. If we think we are the kind of people who would *never* betray someone we love, then we need to be careful, lest like Peter, we end up doing the very thing we swore we would never do. (That's in tomorrow's reading.)

There is the potential in each one of us to be Judas. In fact, I think the more we humble ourselves and admit that we're not better than anyone else, the less likely it is that we become the kind of people who sell their friends for 30 pieces of silver.

Pride goes before a fall. So, help us, Lord, become faithful people.

Note how Jesus explains that Judas's betrayal is both part of God's plan—

See Psalm 41:9,

*Even my close friend in whom I trusted,
who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.—*

and at the same time an act of human evil that will bring consequences upon the betrayer.

Then Jesus explains that the Passover was always about him. Jesus will, through his death on the cross, lead his people out of slavery to sin and death and into the promised land of forgiveness and freedom—it's the ultimate exodus moment.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

MATTHEW 26:30-35

PRIDE BEFORE A FALL

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' ³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³ Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7

"Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"

And predicts that the disciples will all deny him. They refuse to accept the prediction, though of course it proves true.

Pride always goes before a fall. Lord, help us to see ourselves clearly today.

But Jesus also offers a note of hope in his sad prediction of their denials:

“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” [26:32].

They turn their backs on him, but he doesn’t give up on them.

Thanks be to God.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

MATTHEW 26:36-46

GETHSEMANE

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” ³⁹And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” ⁴⁰And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴²Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. ⁴⁵Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

Jesus is troubled by the separation from the Father he is about to endure on the cross, and he prays three times that he might avoid the crucifixion. Nevertheless, he submits to the Father’s will.

Peter, James, and John are the three disciples who were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and the ones who confidently predicted they would stand by him.

“Although Jesus charges them to ‘watch with me,’ they repeatedly fall asleep. The fervency of spirit that James and John manifested when they confidently announced that they were able to drink his cup (Mt 20:22-23), or the determination of Peter when he insisted ‘I will not deny you’ (Mt 26:35), is no match for the weakness of the flesh, unless these disciples, aware of that weakness, direct their resolve not to their own inner resources but to a constant dependence on God in prayer.”

—David Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God*

The same is true for us today: we are much weaker than we think, and so we must be in constant prayer for the Holy Spirit to strengthen us.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

MATTHEW 26:47-56

THE MOMENT OF BETRAYAL

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.” ⁴⁹ And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. ⁵¹ And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. ⁵⁶ But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled.

The religious leaders were afraid to arrest Jesus publicly because of his popularity with the Jerusalem crowds, but Judas's offer to betray Jesus has given them their opportunity. Jesus rebukes violent resistance when he says "those who live by the sword will die by the sword" [26:52]. It is Jewish armed resistance against Roman rule that leads to the destruction of the Temple, but the leaders refuse to heed Jesus's warnings and would rather have him crucified instead.

Note that Jesus is not a victim, but allows himself to be captured.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

MATTHEW 26:57-68

THE IRONY OF THEIR BLASPHEMY

⁵⁷Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. ⁵⁹Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.' " ⁶²And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" ⁶³But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." ⁶⁷Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, ⁶⁸saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

There is a bitter irony about Jesus's trial before the high priest. Jesus is accused of blasphemy, when in fact it is the Jewish leaders who spit and strike the Son of God.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15
MATTHEW 26:69-75; 27:1-10
MURDEROUS HYPOCRISY

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.” ⁷¹ And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.” ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

27 When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ² And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

³ Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴ saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” They said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” ⁵ And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. ⁶ But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.” ⁷ So they took counsel and bought with them the potter’s field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸ Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰ and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me.”

Note the punctilious concern the religious leaders have with the blood money of Judas:

“It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money”
[27:6].

And yet they see no problem with having Jesus sent to Pilate to be crucified on trumped-up charges.

It's as Jesus previously said about them,

"You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" [23:24]

Lord, save us from that kind of blindness today.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

MATTHEW 27:11-44

CRUCIFIED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." ¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" ¹⁴ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

¹⁵ Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶ And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. ¹⁹ Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." ²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. ²¹ The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."

²⁵ And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" ²⁶ Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. ²⁸ And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ³⁰ And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

³² As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. ³⁶ Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷ And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." ³⁸ Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." ⁴¹ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ⁴² "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.' " ⁴⁴ And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

As you read through Matthew's terrible account of Jesus's Passion, some things to notice:

- Jesus is a man of peace, but he is accused of fomenting rebellion against Rome; it is ironic, then, that the people demand the release of Barabbas, an actual revolutionary, and asked for the crucifixion of Jesus;
- Pilate knowingly crucifies an innocent man;
- The people cry out for Jesus's blood; as the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus's blood will be poured out for the very ones who demand his crucifixion;

- This is Jesus's enthronement as king, complete with the crown of thorns;
- The cross is Jesus's throne;
- The Jewish leaders repeat the same temptation that the devil placed before Jesus in the wilderness (4:1-11) when they tell him to save himself from the cross

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

MATTHEW 27:45-56

THE DEATH OF THE SON OF GOD

⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

⁵⁵ There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶ among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Jesus's death changes the world. He is the ultimate Temple sacrifice—so the curtain is torn and the Temple is no longer needed—that brings forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God's people. His death saves, even the Old Testament saints who died beforehand—note the opening of the tombs. And, his death brings into God's family the Gentiles who see him and believe.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

MATTHEW 27:57-66

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ ⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

We are almost finished with the Gospel of Matthew! Three quick points on today's account of the burial of Jesus:

- Joseph of Arimathea is a good man. His faithfulness probably seemed like a waste--why lavish so much attention on a man who was already dead? But some actions are just right in themselves, and there doesn't have to be a larger point. And, of course, what can seem useless to us won't really ever be wasted by the Lord anyway.
- The fact that it is a “new tomb” in which Jesus's body is laid shows that the women couldn't have been mistaken when they later find it empty—Jesus's was the only body previously in there;
- Pilate and the Jewish leadership try to prevent the Resurrection by ordering a guard to keep watch over the tomb. Talk about a useless gesture: there was no power in the universe that could have kept Jesus in the grave!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21
MATHEW 28:1-15
THE RESURRECTION

28 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’” ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

If they could have produced a body, they would have.

Instead, they had to resort to self-evidently ridiculous lies: if the disciples stole the body while they were sleeping, how would they even know that's what happened?

The tomb was empty.

(And it still is.)

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22
MATTHEW 28:16-20
THE END IS THE BEGINNING

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

For the last four months, we've been reading through the Gospel of Matthew, and today we come to the end: the final words of Jesus to his disciples.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

“Organizations lose their way when they lose their why.”

- Michael Hyatt

Why does the church exist? What is its purpose? An uninformed observer, after visiting churches throughout the country, might conclude that the church exists to:

- Host worship services on Sundays; or
- Feed the poor in soup kitchens; or
- Mobilize marchers for a political cause.

And that observer would be wrong. Although churches should host services on Sundays and be in ministry to the poor and work for change in society, none of these worthy activities are the actual mission of the church.

Instead, the mission of the church is to make disciples.

This mission is found in its original context in the Great Commission of Jesus: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”* [28:19-20, NIV].

A disciple is a student. A Christian disciple is someone who is in apprenticeship to Jesus, so as to learn the Jesus way of living.

According to Jesus, this is the point of the church: the church exists to make disciples.

GO EVERYWHERE AND TEACH EVERYTHING

The mission of the church is to go wherever people are and teach them everything Jesus said and did. Jesus does not tell his followers that their mission is to have vibrant worship services or to feed the poor or to be engaged politically; he tells them to make disciples. If we take Jesus's command seriously, we will inevitably host weekly worship services and be in ministry with the poor and we'll be engaged politically, *but these things are the results and implications of the church's mission (i.e., discipleship) and not the primary mission itself.*

Discipleship to Jesus is emphatically not narrowly confined to what we might call habits of personal piety such as prayers, moral living, and Sunday school attendance. Discipleship is not something we do for a few minutes in the morning before we engage with the real world. Note the words of Jesus in the Great Commission: "teach them *everything* I have commanded you." Even the most cursory reading of the gospels shows that Jesus was not merely concerned with matters of personal piety.

Likewise, discipleship to Jesus must be much more than habits of personal piety in our own lives. Discipleship affects all of life, from the personal to the political. After all, from a human perspective, it wasn't personal piety that got Jesus killed — he was killed because he was a threat to the powers and principalities. Jesus was not killed because he was irrelevant to real life, but because he was specifically concerned with real life.

PUT ON YOUR OXYGEN MASK FIRST

As a pastor, I've seen the following many times: a husband and a wife have children who become the focus and emotional fulfillment of their lives. They would do anything for their children's happiness, and they often do. Over time, this focus on the children causes the husband and wife to neglect their own relationship, and the marriage begins to wither. One day, the husband and the wife come to the conclusion that divorce is inevitable, and they break the news to the children. Unintentionally, the parents' apparent focus on the children — at the expense of the marriage — ends up harming those very children in the long run.

First things must come first; our problem is that we tend to focus on second things, and wonder why we aren't getting first results. There is a reason the flight attendant tells you to put your oxygen mask on first, before tending to your child. After all, if you asphyxiate and keel over, there will be no one to help your son or daughter. First things must come first.

The situation in many of our churches today is that we are spending our time focusing on good things, but they are secondary concerns rather than our first mission. Let me reemphasize, the problem is not that worship services and food banks and political engagement are bad things. In fact, they are good and necessary things we need to be doing, and things that Jesus commanded. The problem is that putting these outcomes of discipleship in place of discipleship itself means that we are setting ourselves up to fail, like a panicked mother who forgets to put on her own oxygen mask.

For example, hosting a vibrant worship service is not our first mission, though it is a good thing – a very good thing. If we are actively and effectively making disciples, we will have vibrant worship services on Sundays. But, if we come to believe that vibrant worship services themselves are the point and put our efforts toward that end, at best we'll have superficial shows that lack the power to change hearts, and at worst our churches will be empty.

In a different vein, some American Christians have mistakenly concluded that you can have social justice without discipleship. It didn't work for the Marxists, and it won't work for us. This is because social justice is an abstract idea that is impossible without real men and women bringing it about. If we want to see social justice in America, it won't happen apart from training men and women to die to themselves and sacrifice on behalf of their neighbors. In other words, it won't happen without discipleship. To put discipleship first is not to abandon social justice: on the contrary, the only way to move toward social justice is through the ancient practices of discipleship.

There is a reason the world is such an unjust place, and that reason is sin. It makes people selfish and it makes people cruel. The only cure for sin is the gospel, and it is through the practice of discipleship that Jesus "breaks the power of cancelled sin," as Charles Wesley proclaimed. If the church focuses on training people to be apprentices to Jesus, that effort will unleash ferocious forces of compassion into the world — we'll do more work with the poor, not less.

BRANCHES DON'T NEED MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS

At the Last Supper, Jesus spoke to his disciples about vines, branches, commitment, connectedness, and fruitfulness. Here are a few selected verses:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.... Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." [John 15:1-8]

The branches don't strain and they don't strategize; the branches produce fruit naturally, effortlessly, because they are connected to the vine. Jesus promised his disciples that if they stayed connected to him, then their ministry would be fruitful. To see an example of fruitful ministry, we look to the ministry of Jesus himself and we see that through him, "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:4-5, NIV). Once again, a focus on disciple-making is not a focus on personal piety: the mission of disciple-making is the only way to actually transform the world.

IT WORKED!

"How was it possible for this obscure Jewish sect to become the largest religion in the world?"

Sociologist and world religions scholar Rodney Stark asks an excellent question in his book, *The Triumph of Christianity*:

"[Jesus] was a teacher and miracle worker who spent nearly all of his brief ministry in the tiny and obscure province of Galilee, often preaching to outdoor gatherings. A few listeners took up his invitation to follow him, and a dozen or so became his devoted disciples, but when he was executed by the Romans his followers probably numbered no more than several hundred. How was it possible for this obscure Jewish sect to become the largest religion in the world? [emphasis added]

— Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*

Christianity grew because the followers of Jesus did exactly what he told them to do: they made disciples by going everywhere and teaching everything Jesus commanded.

Churches grow when they make disciples. It's possible to grow churches through the superficial, but it won't last — in that case both the people in the church and the church itself will be like the seed that fell on rocky soil. [13:20-21] To experience true and lasting growth, we need to focus on making disciples.

One of the criticisms of disciple-making is the charge that the “real” work of the church will be neglected. What that is meant to convey is that if we focus on making disciples we will become inward-focused, irrelevant, and neglectful of those in need.

What's fascinating, however, is the original disciples trained other disciples, who trained others, and that, in the early days of the church, these fledgling apprentices to Jesus were known even by their enemies for their care for others – particularly the poor. For example, during the plagues that afflicted the Roman Empire, Christians stayed behind in the infected cities to care for the sick, though this action meant that they often died themselves. As Professor Stark explains:

“Indeed, the impact of Christian mercy was so evident that in the fourth century when the emperor Julian attempted to restore paganism, he exhorted the pagan priesthood to compete with the Christian charities. In a letter to the high priest of Galatia, Julian urged the distribution of grain and wine to the poor, noting that ‘the impious Galileans [Christians], in addition to their own, support ours, [and] it is shameful that our poor should be wanting our aid.’”

—Stark, 118

A disciple learns from his teacher. The early Christians learned from Jesus to lay down their lives and love their neighbors as themselves. The church's focus on discipleship meant that the church grew, because the pagans saw the witness of the disciples of Jesus and were convinced of the truth of the gospel.

The gospel is true and actions based on that truth will be effective. If you rotate crops and fertilize correctly, you will have a bountiful harvest. If you base your life on the words of Jesus, then the things he said would happen, will happen. The words of Jesus aren't a theory: they are the truth about the world itself. The words of Jesus are as true as gravity, and as inescapable.

And so for 2,000 years, whenever the church has taken the Great Commission seriously and put its effort into making disciples, it has flourished.

When Jesus used his last words to tell his disciples their mission was to make disciples, he knew what he was doing.

Let's go.

And Merry Christmas!

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