



Faith
Connections
Bible Study Guide

Winter
21

Welcome the Messiah
Listen to the Messiah



Bible Study Guide

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Winter 2021-22
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Mike L. Wonch

Editor

Judi King

Editor, *Illustrated Bible Life*

Bonnie J. Perry

Director of Editorial

Mark D. Brown

Publisher

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Perspectives

Listen!

Picture this: You are having dinner with a friend in a crowded restaurant. You're discussing financial investments and your friend tells you what his/her broker suggests. You respond by telling your friend what your broker—uttering a specific company name—says, and suddenly the whole restaurant becomes quiet, with everyone leaning in to hear as you share your broker's advice. Sound familiar? This is a famous scenario from a 1970s commercial. These ads were intended to lead you to believe that when his/her investment broker spoke, people listened.

Today, many things compete for our listening ear. It is estimated that the average person per day sees 5,000 ads, sends or receives 94 texts, and spends six hours online. The messages we hear from politicians, news organizations, consumer products, friends, family, and so on can become overwhelming. It is often easy to seemingly listen to everyone and at the same time, really listen to no one. Someone has compared our attempts to hear and process all the messages we receive every minute of every day to that of drinking from a firehose. The fact is we live in an age when listening—really listening—involves intentionality. That is, purposefully taking time to hear and understand.

One thing I enjoy is sitting down with my wife after we get home from work and hearing about her day—both the highs and the lows. As I listen, I focus my attention on her, letting her know that she is important, and therefore what she has to say is important. When she is talking, I do not think about sports, television, or my “to do” list; I center on her. Really listening to my wife involves my undivided attention.

This quarter, we are focusing on the Messiah from the book of Matthew. We will look at who Jesus is, what He did, and what He came to teach us. As we encounter each story, it is important that we do not just hear the stories, but really listen. This means going beyond just reading and/or hearing the words, but seeking to understand, meditating on, and obeying its message.

Each week, as you enter the room of your small group, may your prayer echo the words of Samuel, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10).

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

December

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THE PROMISE OF THE MESSIAH

*Even when things look dark, God remembers
His people and is working on their behalf.*

THE WORD

JEREMIAH
23:1-8

Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. ²Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. ³“I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD.

KEY VERSES

⁵**“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.**

⁶**In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.**

⁷“So then, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when people will no longer say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ ⁸but they will say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

The Old Testament frequently uses “shepherds” as a metaphor for leaders (Ezekiel 34:5; Zechariah 10:2). Perhaps this was because Israel’s most notable leaders, Moses and David, were shepherds before God chose them to lead His people.

Prophets proclaimed divine judgment against the evil leaders/shepherds of Israel and Judah. They led their “sheep” astray and rejected God’s guidance. Not really the leaders’ sheep, God’s people were actually “the sheep of his pasture” (Psalms 74:1; 100:3). Judgment would mean their exile and the end of their role as leaders.

Some prophecies of promise and return from exile portray God as the true Shepherd of Israel (Psalms 23:1; Zechariah 9:16). Others, as in today’s passage, offer hope for another “shepherd”—a Messiah who, like David, will care for His people.

GOD WILL PUNISH AND REPLACE UNWORTHY LEADERS

Jeremiah 23:1-4

Assyria had taken the people of the northern kingdom of Israel into exile (721 BC) well over a century before Jeremiah’s prophecy here (around 586 BC). The leaders of the southern kingdom of Judah had repeatedly ignored Jeremiah’s impassioned warnings of a similar disaster awaiting them—exile at the hands of the rising Babylonian empire.

Deuteronomy reminded God’s people of their ancient covenant with God. Their land was His gracious gift. He had kept His covenant with their ancestors, blessing them with the promised land. But their continual unfaithfulness to the covenant put them under the threat of the curse of exile—the loss of their land.

The prophet’s message has the form of a “woe-oracle.” The Hebrew word translated “woe” represents the cries of mourners at Middle-Eastern funerals. Spoken in advance of their deaths, it strongly denounced Judah’s irresponsible leaders and announced their impending doom. It may have referred specifically to

Did You Know?

Each of the three sections of this judgment speech are “oracles of Yahweh” (“declares the LORD,” vv. 1, 2, 5, and 7). The word “oracle” designates any speech by a prophet. “Yahweh” transliterates the Hebrew personal name of Israel’s God (“Jehovah” in the KJV). By the 2nd century BC, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint [Sep-TOO-uh-jint], replaced the divine name with *kyrios* (= “lord”). Pious Jews hesitated to speak the name aloud. Most English translations follow this precedent, using Lord (with small capitals) for Yahweh.

GOD WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE THROUGH A RIGHTEOUS MESSIAH

the unfaithful successors of Judah’s righteous king Josiah. But it explicitly mentioned no names of the royal family, identifying them only by their “evil” deeds.

Judah’s kings had neglected their primary responsibility—to tend to the needs of their people. Instead they had destroyed (v. 1), “scattered . . . and driven away” God’s “flock” (v. 2). Because of what they had done and left undone, the nation was “afraid” and “terrified” (v. 4).

God would tend to the punishment the leaders justly deserved. Judgment would mean the reversal of the present state of affairs: Positively, God would return the righteous exiles to their homeland, where they would “be fruitful and increase in number” (v. 3; see Genesis 1:22, 28; 17:2-8). Negatively, He would scatter the unworthy leaders into exile, and replace them with “shepherds . . . who will tend” God’s people (v. 4).

Salvation and judgment are inseparable. To recreate His people, God would remove their unfit leaders, replace them with a righteous leader, and care for His united people. This passage echoes in Jesus’ discourse about the “good shepherd” in John 10:1-18.

Jeremiah 23:5-6

Jeremiah’s prophecy of the coming of the Savior-Messiah conveys in different words the same hope announced earlier in Isaiah 11:1-9. A similar promise is repeated in Jeremiah 33:15-16. The announcement of the future king’s name is comparable to Isaiah 9:5.

The Messiah would be a descendant of David, “who will reign wisely and do what is just and right” (v. 5). He would rule a reunited kingdom, encompassing both “Judah” and “Israel” (31:27-28; 33:16; Hosea 1:11; Ezekiel 37:15-28).

Jeremiah seemed to contrast the future king with Judah’s last reigning monarch, a disappointing member of the Davidic royal family. Named Mattaniah at birth (2 Kings 24:17; 1 Chronicles 3:15; 2 Chronicles 36:10), the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar assigned

Think About It

Jesus provides an example for everyone entrusted with the care of God's people. He wanted to make sure that all who were not right with God would have the opportunity to enter God's compassionate kingdom.

GOD WILL CREATE A NEW PEOPLE THROUGH A NEW EXODUS

him the throne-name Zedekiah. This common Hebrew name means “Yahweh is my righteousness/salvation.” But he miserably failed to live up to the moniker.

The new king Jeremiah promised would possess a character opposite that of Zedekiah. As “a righteous Branch” in the royal family of David, the Messiah would be like an unexpected sprout from a dead stump (v. 5; see Jeremiah 33:15; Isaiah 4:2; 11:1, 10; Zechariah 3:8). Unlike the illegitimate king Zedekiah, the Messiah would be the rightful heir of His great ancestor David. His name would be “The LORD [Is] Our Righteous Savior” (v. 6).

Jeremiah 23:7-8

As in Jeremiah 16:14-15, the prophet envisioned the salvation the coming Messiah would bring as comparable to a new exodus. By releasing them from Babylonian exile, God would again fulfill His promise to their ancestors and restore them to “their own land” (v. 8).

The prophet's confidence in this hope-filled future was unshakable—“As surely as the LORD lives” (vv. 7 and 8). The same God who brought their ancestors out of the land of the south—“Egypt”—would bring their descendants “up out of the land of the north”—Babylon. God would give His people a new beginning. But first, they had to learn the lessons of exile.

CONCLUSION

Christians cannot read this passage without thinking of Jesus as its ultimate fulfillment. As “the good shepherd,” He would lay down His life to save the sheep (John 10:11, 15) as one united flock—believing Jews and Gentiles together as the new people of God (John 10:16).

REFLECT

In what ways do you feel God's “shepherding” presence in your life?

GEORGE LYONS is Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Northwest Nazarene University. He was a General Editor of the *New Beacon Bible Commentary* series and authored or coauthored its volumes on *Romans 1–8*, *Romans 9–16*, *Galatians*, *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, and *Philemon*, *John 1–12*, and *John 13–21*.

December

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EXPECT THE MESSIAH

*We can trust in God's presence to lead
to wholeness and transformation.*

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
11:1-15**

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

²When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

KEY VERSES

⁴**Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”**

⁷As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵Whoever has ears, let them hear.

ENGAGE THE WORD

DISAPPOINTED BY JESUS?

Matthew 11:1-3

Jesus began His independent ministry only after John the Baptist was imprisoned (Matthew 4:12; see Mark 1:14; Luke 3:1-20). His central message (Matthew 4:17) was much the same as John's (3:1)—a call to repent in preparation for the coming kingdom of heaven.

When John baptized Jesus, God revealed that Jesus was His beloved Son (3:17), the Coming One (see Isaiah 59:20), whose way John prepared (3:11). Had John expected the Messiah to bring only divine judgment—a fiery baptism of “the wrath to come” (3:7-12)?

When John heard in prison “what the Messiah was doing” (11:2), his confidence was shaken. Was he disappointed by the exclusively gracious character of Jesus' ministry? Or, was he just surprised that doing what God had called him to do had led to his arrest? Regardless of the reason, John sent his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (11:3). John's question, prompted by what he had heard about the deeds of the Messiah (3:2), suggests that he expected a different kind of Messiah than Jesus seemed to be.

EVIDENCE THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH

Matthew 11:4-6

Jesus did not directly answer John's question. Instead, He offered evidence that He was, indeed, the Messiah, fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah (26:19; 29:18–20; 35:5–6; 61:1). He urged John's disciples to tell their master about His deeds recounted in Matthew 5—9: Sight restored to the blind (8:27-30); the lame walking (8:5-13; 9:1-7); lepers cleansed (8:1-4); those unable to hear and speak are able to hear and speak (9:32-34); the dead raised (9:18-26); the poor offered “good news” (5—7).

Using the beatitude-form familiar in 5:3-11, Jesus encouraged John to keep believing, despite his uncertainties: “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at

Did You Know?

John's confrontational preaching challenged the status quo. This led to his imprisonment and death (14:1-12). Matthew's report prepares its readers for the opposition Jesus would face.

JESUS' COMMENDATION OF JOHN

me" (v. 6). To take offense translates the Greek word *skandalizō*, to be caused to stumble or sin (see 5:29-30; 13:21, 57; 15:12; 17:27; 18:6-9; 26:31-33).

Jesus urged John not to be scandalized by His failure to bring immediate judgment on wrongdoers, nor by John's unpleasant personal circumstances. We too need to be reminded that Jesus does not always fit our expectations or act on our timetables.

Matthew 11:7-15

As the disciples of John the Baptist left center stage, Jesus addressed the crowds. Did overhearing John's doubts about Jesus tempt them to doubt as well?

John's appearance in the wilderness of Judea had attracted a huge following of Jews from every walk of life (Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:2-5; Luke 3:1-19; John 1:19-28). Many wondered if he might even be the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus' two rhetorical questions encouraged the crowds to consider what it was about John that had brought them to accept his preaching and baptism. Both questions presumed a negative answer.

John was nothing like a frail, flimsy, and fickle reed, accommodating his message to the expectations of his audience to win their approval (v. 7). His bold confrontation of Israel's hypocritical religious leaders (Matthew 3:7-10) and its immoral monarch (14:1-12) demonstrated that. And John was no pampered celebrity, seeking a life of ease at the expense of his "fans." His simple dress and diet made that obvious (3:4).

Instead, John's forthright demeanor correctly reminded his hearers of Israel's countercultural prophetic tradition—in particular of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:7-8; Malachi 3:1; 4:5). In verse 14, Jesus explicitly claimed that John fulfilled the role of Elijah, whose return many contemporary Jews expected to precede the coming of the Messiah. John modestly hesitated to make such claims for himself (John 1:20-24).

Since creation, all human beings have been "born of women" (v. 11; see 1 Corinthians 11:11). Therefore,

Think About It

We must not let our occasional confusion, doubts, or questions scandalize us—cause us to abandon our faith that Jesus is the promised Messiah. We must let Him reign as He decides.

Jesus' words about John contrasted him with every other human who had ever lived prior to Jesus. Jesus did not condemn John for his doubts. Instead, He offered him the highest praise imaginable: John was the greatest human being who had ever lived until that moment (v. 11).

That should encourage us when the circumstances of our lives cause us to ask anxious questions or entertain troubling doubts. Despite the persuasive evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, faith operates in a realm in which definitive proof is impossible. Despite remarkable healings, suffering continues. Unjust earthly rulers continue to punish those who speak uncomfortable truths they do not want to hear.

Following Jesus' glowing commendation of John, He added an even more shocking claim: The least important persons in the new age inaugurated by Jesus would be greater than the greatest man in the current age (see 2 Corinthians 3:7-18). Matthew does not explain in what sense they would be greater or when the new age begins.

The coming of "the kingdom of heaven" must refer to the era of Jesus' first coming, and not to the end of world. Otherwise, His words in verse 12 make no sense: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it." This most likely refers to the rising opposition to the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Both were eventually executed. The kingdom came especially near in Jesus' birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of the gift of the Holy Spirit. But the decisive question remains: Will we allow Him to reign alone in our lives here and now?

REFLECT

Think about the ways Jesus, the Messiah, has transformed your life.

December

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RECEIVE THE MESSIAH

Joseph is an example of one who transcended (overcame) his fear through radical obedience to God.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
1:18-25**

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

KEY VERSE

²⁴**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.** ²⁵But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Strangely enough, from a 21st century perspective, the first gospel begins with a genealogy (1:1-17). This table of Jesus’ ancestors moves forward from Abraham to Jesus. Luke’s gospel also includes a genealogy, but later in the book and traced backwards from Jesus to Adam (Luke 3:23-38).

Luke's Christmas story focuses on Mary. Matthew tells "how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about" (1:18) entirely from Joseph's perspective. Matthew's genealogy emphasizes that Jesus was a Jew—a "son of Abraham" (1:1) from the tribe of Judah (1:2)—and a descendant of Israel's king David (1:1, 6, 20). Luke (1:5, 36) implies that Mary belonged to the tribe of Levi. It also stresses that as a "son of Adam," Jesus represents all humanity (3:38).

Matthew's genealogy has an unexpected anomaly in 1:16. Unlike all the previous descriptions in this repetitive line of descent, Matthew does not say Joseph "was the father of" Jesus. Instead, it says "Joseph was the husband of Mary," the mother of Jesus.

Unlike Old Testament genealogies, Matthew's mentions women—four, in fact. And they are not the matriarchs we would expect—like Sarah, Rebekah, or Rachel. Instead, it mentions women who scandalized the family tree: "Tamar;" "Rahab," the Canaanite prostitute; the Moabitess "Ruth;" and "Uriah's wife," the unnamed Bathsheba. Matthew prepares us to expect the unexpected.

AN UNEXPECTED PREGNANCY

Matthew 1:18-19

Matthew introduces Joseph as a righteous, law-abiding man, engaged to be married to Mary. If contemporary Jewish customs were observed, she was probably a young teenager and he was about 30. Sometime before they married, it was discovered that she was pregnant. Joseph knew he was not the father (1:18). But he did not know (yet) what readers learn immediately: "The Holy Spirit" was responsible for her condition (see Luke 1:35). This offers one explanation for Jesus' status as the unique Son of God—fully human and fully divine.

Joseph made plans to do what the law required in such awkward situations. Formally breaking engagements in Jewish practice required "divorce." But Joseph mercifully preferred to do so "quietly," to avoid

Did You Know?

The Messiah as Immanuel, “God with us” (1:23), is a recurring theme in Matthew’s gospel. Recall Jesus’ promises in 18:20—“Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them,” and in 28:20—“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

AN UNEXPECTED EXPLANATION

PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT

the “public disgrace” of exposing his fiancée’s apparent unfaithfulness. To avoid the scandal of public censure, Joseph was considering an out-of-court settlement. He was a man who gave proper attention “to the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23).

Matthew 1:20-21

Before Joseph acted on his humane plan, he slept on it. Like his Old Testament namesake (Genesis 37—50), Joseph received divine guidance through dreams (see also 2:12-13, 19, 22): “An angel of the Lord appeared to him” (1:20).

The angel made a point of Joseph’s messianic descent by addressing him as “Joseph, son of David.” As often in biblical accounts of divine appearances, the messenger first urged Joseph, “Do not be afraid” (see Genesis 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; Luke 1:13, 30). He instructed him to abandon his divorce plans: “Take Mary home as your wife.” Only then did Joseph learn what readers already know (1:18): “What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (1:20).

The angel assured Joseph that Mary’s child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that it would be a boy. Joseph was to accept the child as his own by giving him the name “Jesus.” In the sight of the law, this procedure would make the child a legal descendant of David. The Hebrew name *Yeshua* means, “Yahweh saves.” Thus, the angel explained, “Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). Born into a world scared by scandal and sin, Jesus would bring God’s salvation (see 14:30; 20:28; 26:28; 27:42). Receive the Messiah!

Matthew 1:22-23

Both Matthew and Luke (1:26-38) point to the virginal conception of Jesus. Matthew describes the circumstances surrounding the virginal conception of Jesus as a filling-full of the Immanuel prophecy of

Think About It

Think of the tremendous blessing that Joseph would have missed had he not participated in the divine plan. Joy and blessings are awaiting us when we respond in obedience to God.

Isaiah 7:14 (as in Luke 1:26-33). The prophets foretold the coming of “Immanuel,” “God with us” (v. 23). What a beautiful assurance and amazing, unspeakable gift that God himself would come to live among mere humanity. The actual name of Jesus was announced to Mary (Luke 1:31) and then to Joseph (Matthew 1:21). The name was significant because it embodied His character and His reason for coming.

The point and application of the prophecy in Matthew is to identify the coming of Jesus as the definitive evidence that God was with His people despite their past marked by sin and unfaithfulness. Jesus was and forever will be “God with us” (1:23; see 18:20; 28:18-20). Receive the Messiah!

**FAITHFUL
OBEDIENCE****Matthew 1:24-25**

As always (see 2:14-15, 21), Joseph did exactly what the angel instructed him to do. He carefully avoided any suspicion that he might be Jesus’ biological father. As a genuinely righteous man (1:18), he did more than the law or cultural conventions required.

The Greek does not say that Joseph took Mary into his “home.” Luke 2:5 may suggest that the marriage did not occur until after Jesus’ birth. Regardless, the couple did not live as husband and wife until after the birth of Jesus. By marrying Mary and naming her son, Joseph made Jesus his lawful child.

Rumors and gossip being what they are, however, it is not surprising that some of Jesus’ contemporaries presumed Joseph was His father (see John 1:45). To those who question whether “Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph” could be the Messiah, we say with Nathanael, “Come and see” (John 1:45-46). Receive the Messiah!

REFLECT

Think about the way you can open up your life to Jesus, the Messiah, today.

December

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WORSHIP THE MESSIAH

We are called to worship Jesus as our King.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
2:1-12**

KEY VERSES

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

ENGAGE THE WORD

UNEXPECTED WORSHIPERS

Matthew 2:1-2

Matthew 2:16 implies that the magi appeared in Jerusalem some two years after Jesus was born. Matthew's story has so far emphasized the Jewishness of Jesus. But these so-called "wise men" (KJV) were Gentiles—pagan, Zoroastrian [zaw-row-AH-stree-uhn] priest-astrologers from somewhere in Arabia or Mesopotamia.

The Jews had Scripture; the magi had no special revelation, only an unusual star that persuaded them the "king of the Jews" had been born. They came to Jerusalem because the star pointed them only in the right general direction—to the center of Jewish religion and politics.

The purpose of the magi's visit was to "worship" the Messiah. The Greek verb refers to the Middle Eastern practice of lying prostrate (in respect, submission, and reverence) before a superior person or a god.

DISTURBING THE PEACE

Matthew 2:3-6

Whether the magi considered the child divine or merely the human heir-apparent to the throne of Israel, their quest "disturbed" the sitting king. "Herod the Great" was the Roman-appointed, "King of the Jews" from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC (1:19). His son Herod Antipas (14:12), grandson Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12), and great-grandson Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25—26), dominated political life in Israel for the next two-thirds of a century.

Herod had good reason to be afraid and agitated. He was an Edomite, a non-Jew. The Jerusalem elites, preferring the comforts of the status quo, cared little for the longings of the masses for the appearance of God's Messiah. By intimidation and violence, Herod maintained an uneasy "peace." The stir created by the magi threatened to disturb that.

In response, Herod did what leaders seem instinctively to do—he called a meeting. He assembled

Did You Know?

The magi, or wise men, were members of a priestly class among the ancient Medes and Persians. They were apparently astrologers who searched the heavens for signs. They hold the distinction of being the first Gentiles to whom it was revealed that Jesus was the Son of God.

DEVIOUS WOULD-BE WORSHIPER

AUTHENTIC WORSHIP

Jerusalem's leading citizens, representing the major Jewish sects—Sadducees, the politically and economically powerful “chief priests,” and the Pharisees, the religiously influential “teachers of the law.”

Herod asked them “where the Messiah was to be born.” Their consensus was based on the prophecy of Micah 5:1-4. Israel's long-awaited “leader”/“shepherd” would come from “Bethlehem in Judea.” This village, five miles south of Jerusalem, had been the hometown of David, Israel's greatest king (1 Samuel 16:1; see John 7:41-42).

Matthew 2:7-8

During the magi's private audience with Herod, he asked when the star had first appeared. He used this information later in his unsuccessful attempt to eliminate this latest potential rival to his throne (2:16-18).

The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus (Jewish Wars I), well documents Herod's paranoia. He had his second wife, three sons, other relatives, and untold enemies executed, when he suspected them of plots to usurp his throne. What difference could the slaughter of a few peasant children make?

Herod told the magi nothing of his devious plot. He informed them only of what he had learned from his advisors about the Messiah's birthplace. Before Herod sent them to Bethlehem, he instructed them to return and report to him. He dishonestly claimed he too would then go and worship “the child.” The conniving fraud must have been persuasive, because only God's warning caused them instead to return “to their own country by another route” (2:12).

Matthew 2:9-12

There are many appropriate expressions of worship. When the magi again “saw the star, they were overjoyed.” When they saw the child, “they bowed down and worshiped him . . . and presented him with gifts.” The shepherds glorified and praised God (Luke

Think About It

The magi provide a meaningful, helpful pattern for worship: 1) they entered joyfully, 2) they sought Christ earnestly, 3) they humbled themselves respectfully, 4) they worshiped reverently, 5) they gave generously, and 6) they obeyed fully.

2:20). Those who heard their story were amazed (Luke 2:18). Mary quietly “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).

Have we become jaded by the familiar story? Do we sing “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and sit unmoved? The magi teach us that Christmas is not a call to “shop ‘til we drop,” but to worship in awe.

Had the Messiah really come? Most first-century Jews who heard the story would have considered those first worshipers of the Infant King inconsequential riffraff and aliens. Herod saw Jesus as an earthly rival and plotted to kill him. Not to mention, the new age dawned and Augustus had remained undisturbed on his throne in Rome. However, the good news of peace is not about politics and life as usual. Jesus, the Messiah, had indeed arrived!

Like the cross, nativity scenes should remind us of the shocking message of God’s grace. Rather than just feelings of sentimentalism, perhaps we need to drop our defenses and see the nativity with new eyes, to see the shocking good news of the gospel in the manger scene, to see ourselves as needy sinners, kneeling alongside raggedy shepherds and foreign pagans. Perhaps, then we could see how the nativity presents a vision of a totally new order—a world radically transformed by amazing grace!

Come and worship, then go and tell! There’s a needy world out there, dying to hear the good news we’ve had all along.

CONCLUSION

REFLECT

Why did none of the leaders who knew where the Messiah was to be born go with the magi to worship Him? Why do we sometimes fail to act on what we know?

GEORGE LYONS

January

2

JESUS THE KINGDOM TEACHER

Jesus challenges us to live according to the counter-cultural values of the kingdom that He, as the Messiah, has ushered in.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
5:1-2**

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ²and he began to teach them.

17-20

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹**Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.** ²⁰For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

KEY VERSE

43-48

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Let's talk about laws! I sense the excitement already. Do people love laws? Some laws more than others. Unless you are in the legal profession, laws typically evoke mixed feelings. Everyone would agree that laws are necessary, but not always enjoyable. Today we will see God's law in a very different way, as something to be embraced.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5:1-2

Our session focus today is found in the larger teaching recorded in Matthew as the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5—7, he records the heart of Jesus' teaching. These teachings in Matthew reveal the heart of what Jesus wanted to teach about His life and the kingdom. That means we should listen very carefully, as always, to what He is trying to tell us.

MISUNDERSTANDING THE LAW AND JESUS

Matthew 5:17-18

It's not surprising that the people welcomed Jesus' corrective challenge to the way the law was used—and abused—by the Pharisees and religious leaders. It had become a heavy burden, a source of oppression, to most of the people. Who could satisfy its demands? Who could even really understand its demands? Seemingly, only the professional practitioners of religion.

It's not surprising that the people heard Jesus' challenge as a rejection of the heavy burden of the law. Liberation! But Jesus made clear that they had misunderstood both the purpose of the law and what Jesus was trying to teach them. He didn't want to do away with the law, He wanted to fulfill its true purpose. That is, the law was never meant to be a regulatory burden on people. It was meant to be a guide toward the life of God. It was intended to teach what God desired and what He hated. Its goal was to help us know Him—so that we can be like Him. But the law was always limited. It could only point the way, but couldn't transform from the inside out. Jesus brings us

Did You Know?

The reference in Matthew 5:18, “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen,” refers to the rigorous requirements for accuracy in copying the law. The smallest letter refers to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet (think “i”) and “the least stroke of a pen” referred to something like the dot on the “i.” The keepers of the law demanded rigorous accuracy in recording the law down to the smallest “jot and tittle.” They show that it is possible to be rigorous about the law and still miss the point.

FULFILLING THE LAW

a new enabling to achieve an old goal—to know God and be like Him.

DANGER . . . DANGER!

Matthew 5:19-20

Failure to rightly understand the law and its purpose may cause us to assume that, since we are under the grace of Christ and not the law, we can act without regard to law. We may see the law as irrelevant, having been replaced by grace.

I knew of a group of young ministry students who assumed that the provision of grace radically freed them from the law. So, to demonstrate their radical dependence on grace, regardless of the law, they purposefully acted in ways counter to law. Sadly, they misunderstood grace as well as the law. These verses teach us that God still desires what the law was attempting to do. And the pointers it offers to the life and character of God remain true—even as the grace of Christ enables us to live the life that the law can only point toward.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law—at their best—were only able to simulate the life that the law was pointing to. Jesus’ grace enables us to “fulfill” the law (achieve its goal) as it helps us gain understanding and enables faithful living. The Pharisees and teachers of the law could only achieve an appearance of holiness. Jesus enables its reality in us.

Matthew 5:43-47

Law might restrain our actions against an enemy. We might try—because of the law—not to actualize our feelings against them. But only grace can change those feelings, nurturing love for those enemies. What an unnatural outcome! What an impossible expectation! But what the law could not do, was not able to achieve, God can do in us through Christ.

Psalm 51 shows this contrast clearly. What God really desires is not burnt offerings or sacrifices, but what

Think About It

Psalm 1 describes the blessed person as one who delights in the law and meditates on it day and night. The Scribes and Pharisees surely thought they were honoring this charge. Clearly, Jesus tells us that they missed the point. What is the right way for us to delight in the law? How can we “meditate” on it properly?

those practices were meant to help nurture in us—a broken and contrite heart. The outward sacrificial burnt offerings were meant to express externally a heart attitude of contrition and surrender to God. The outward sacrifices were a means. The changed heart is the end goal that God desires.

God’s Word will show us the way. But in the end, our goal is not to master the Word, but to be mastered by it.

Matthew 5:48

What a shocking conclusion to this passage! “Be perfect...as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” It sounds as if God is setting a level of expectation that is more daunting and overwhelming than the law. But let’s reconsider what God is calling us to do. What if this call is more about the direction and focus of our lives, rather than the standard of our performance? That is, He is calling us to pursue the fulfillment of the law rather than merely satisfying its requirements. We should never be satisfied with anything less than becoming like Him through the power of the Holy Spirit. Satisfying the rules of religious practice can never be enough. Our whole-hearted, lifelong pursuit is to be like Him—to learn to love what He loves, to live as He lived, to understand ourselves and our world as He does is the life He calls us to live.

BEING PERFECT

REFLECT

Think about what it means for you to be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

CARL LETH is Emeritus Professor of Theology at Olivet Nazarene University and currently heads a non-profit, New Creation Project, focused on mobilizing Christians for ministries of service and compassion.

January

9

WARNING AGAINST HYPOCRISY

*God's judgment is perfect and best;
our judgment is flawed and imperfect.*

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
7:1-5**

KEY VERSES

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

**MATTHEW
23:1-12**

¹Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries[a] wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted with respect in the market-places and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

⁸“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest

among you will be your servant. ¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

ENGAGE THE WORD

As a pastor I always dreaded the conversations that started, “Now, pastor, I don’t mean to be critical.” I knew what was coming. Truthfully, some of those conversations were very helpful to me. Those came from people that wanted the best for me and the church, and were trying to help me be better. They may have been painful, but they were redemptive. However, there were other conversations when someone “spoke the truth in love” (it often felt like there wasn’t much love and sometimes not very much truth), taking the opportunity to let me know how wrong I was or how flawed my performance was as a pastor. How do we have conversations, as well as attitudes and actions, that honor Christ and build up our brothers and sisters?

A QUESTION OF JUDGMENT

Matthew 7:1-2

Jesus begins our instruction with a caution. Remember, judgment can go both ways. It feels easier when we are judging someone else than when someone is judging us. Have you ever known someone who was quick to judge someone else but was incensed when someone would be bold enough to criticize them? Jesus is teaching us a sound working principle for making judgments. Be sure to judge others in the same way—using the same measures—that you would want to be used in judging you. Not whether you are right or wrong, but how we go about coming to our conclusion, our judgment, and how we communicate it.

PERSPECTIVE AND JUDGMENT

Matthew 7:3-5

Perspective matters. It influences what we see and how we see it. It can help us and it can limit us. One of the typical features of looking at things from our personal perspective is that the flaws, failings, and

Did You Know?

The Bible uses sight imagery to express spiritual vision, or lack of it. In 2 Kings 6:13-17, Elisha and his servant have very different sight. In Matthew 9:36, Jesus “sees” the crowd, perceiving their distress and need. God wants to improve our “vision.”

excesses of others appear larger and clearer to us than our own. It’s like those cautions on a rearview mirror—what we see in the mirror may be different than it appears. Just as the flaws of others are magnified, our own failings appear diminished; they fail to capture our attention. Jesus is trying to teach us this principle and caution us to be aware of it.

Here is where the Spirit offers a great resource for seeing clearly. It is humility. This powerful, but overlooked fruit of the Spirit enables us to correct our vision. Humility inevitably draws our attention to our own shortcomings, making them prominent in our sight. It places a caution on our judgments, mindful of our ability to assume that our assessment is correct. Like the proud parent, watching his/her child marching with his/her school’s marching band and observing, “Look, my child is the only one in step.” We can laugh at that parent, but we are very capable of similar assessments. We’re right, and everyone else is wrong. Humility focuses a bright light on our self-deceptions and prompts us to be more generous and careful in our judgments of others. And, to our amazement, we eventually discover that humility saw more clearly after all.

HOLY LIFESTYLE OR HOLY LIFE

Matthew 23:1-7

The gift of grace does not mean we are not called to live a holy life. Jesus instructed His disciples and the listening crowd that they “must be careful to do everything” the teachers of the law and the Pharisees told them to do. But immediately He added, “but do not do what they do.” The disciples could be forgiven for being a little confused. And we may be, too. But, aren’t we supposed to be holy in how we live?

We may clarify the problem by making a working distinction between a holy lifestyle and a holy life. A holy lifestyle is all about acting in the right ways, making the holy choices in how we carry ourselves and display what we do. It flourishes in a context of

Think About It

We often see division in the church over who is “right.” But in the long history of the church, schism (division) has been understood as the most serious offense, more destructive than heresy (wrong thinking). This is not to say that wrong ideas are not a problem, but that dividing the body is a more serious problem.

SERVANTHOOD AND STATUS

legalism, rules and regulations to be followed. And while holiness is to be our goal and standard, it isn’t a holiness of performance. Jesus calls us to be holy people, to live holy lives as an overflow or expression of a heart devotion to Christ. The Pharisees knew how to act in the proper ways, but it never reached their hearts. It was for show.

In the holiness movement we need to be carefully attentive to this distinction. There have been times and places when we were very good at the lifestyle, but not so good at the holy life and heart. Christ is unrelenting in His call to holiness, but it is a call to be people transformed from the inside out, living out of our identity in Him.

Matthew 23:8-12

The Pharisees and teachers of the law saw their holy lifestyle as a means to respect and status. But Jesus wants to make it clear to His disciples that He sees this in a completely different way. All of us are followers together, brothers and sisters of the same Father. Rich and poor, high and low, we kneel together at the foot of the cross, all recipients of undeserved grace.

For Christ-followers, success is to be a servant to others. Humbling ourselves, we imitate the One who humbled himself for us. This changes all of our conversations, as well as attitudes and actions, including (maybe, especially) the critical ones.

REFLECT

Consider ways you can, with God’s help, foster an attitude of humility.

CARL LETH

January

16

A CALL FOR CONSISTENT OBEDIENCE

*Jesus calls us to make the costly investment
in authentic discipleship.*

THE WORD

MATTHEW
7:13-23

KEY VERSES

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

¹⁵“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

ENGAGE THE WORD

Cal Ripken was a legendary baseball player. He set the record for consecutive games played at 2,632, an amazing feat. But he not only played, he played really well. He was a Hall of Fame player at shortstop and third base. An interviewer asked the secret to his success. His answer: he showed up every day ready

to play and he did the right things. That's not a bad formula for faithful discipleship and points us in the right direction for today's session.

MISTAKING GATES

Matthew 7:13-14

If you've ever attended a major sporting event at a large arena or stadium you're familiar with gates. Where you enter determines how you get to where you are going. If you go in the wrong gate you may have to walk all the way around the venue to get to your seats, and that can be a long way! In fact, if you enter certain gates you may find that you actually cannot get to your seats from there. Access may be restricted or hindered in some way. Not a great start to the day!

Jesus is trying to help us avoid this unpleasant discovery in our pursuit of following Him. This is especially a concern because of the prominence and appeal of the wrong gate. If we follow the crowd we will be swept along a broad and easy way. Who isn't happy to find a shortcut? But it isn't really a shortcut if it takes you into a cul-de-sac that captures you in the wrong place.

Jesus wants to be clear about the journey He is inviting us to. It's a narrow way, calling us to follow Jesus in particular ways. And it won't always be easy. In fact, it is a challenging way. Abandon any notions of discipleship-lite. This is the radical way for committed travelers. But it is the way to life, and that makes it all worthwhile.

WHO CAN YOU TRUST?

Matthew 7:15-20

If entering at the correct gate is critical, it follows that listening to the right guide is critical. Who will point us in the right directions? How can we discern trustworthy teachers? Jesus warns us against being distracted or misled by appealing performance or winsome style. Appearances can mislead us. They sound right. They look like they know what they're doing. They are certainly confident in their opinions.

Did You Know?

Matthew returned to the theme of 7:20-23 in Matthew 25:31-46, elaborating on the types of action (fruit) that will be measured in the final judgment. The fact that we find this passage as the last teaching passage before the events of Passover week begin to unfold suggests its importance. This is not a passing comment, but a key message to Jesus' followers.

But, despite all of that, they may point us in the wrong direction. How are we to discern the trustworthy teachers from the false?

The answer is in the fruit they bear, the effects of their teaching. And let's be clear, by fruit we don't mean the productivity of their work. We like results, so we value people who "produce." Are you making money? Are you gathering followers? Are you popular? But the kind of fruit Jesus means is the fruit of personal character and character of life. Are you producing the right "stuff"? Christlikeness and kingdom character are not the same outcomes as numbers, popularity, and status.

Sadly, we sometimes make this mistake in the church. We are drawn to success. If a church is growing, if a preacher brings in the crowds, we want to get on the bandwagon. Now, I'm not against growing churches or crowds. They can be good things. But they might not be. The false teachers Jesus warns us about are precisely the kinds of successful leaders that we may be drawn to. That makes the measures we are using that much more important. What kind of community are we building? How do we treat other people? How do we respond to those inevitable people who require extra grace? Can others discern the "aroma" of the kingdom when they are among us? What a life produces reveals that life.

Eventually, truth will win out. Flashy leaders and impressive growth statistics will only endure if they are the outcome of faithful following, pursuing Christlikeness. Rising stars fall to earth. Stunning success stories become stunning stories of another kind. But faithful pursuit of Christ and His kingdom and character will never be wasted or be out of date. Fruit will tell.

BECOMING TRUE FOLLOWERS

Matthew 7:21-23

Just as we need to clarify the trustworthiness of our teachers, we need to examine ourselves to make sure that we are also trustworthy followers of Jesus. Jesus cautions us not to simply assume that we are on the

Think About It

“Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate... Costly grace... is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”
[The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), pp.45, 47].

right track because we call Jesus, “Lord.” Church membership is not enough. Regular church attendance is not enough. Even faithful giving is not enough. Jesus even tells us that doing miracles and driving out demons will not meet His standard. Amazing! Dramatic performance doesn’t replace faithful discipleship and obedience.

Jesus wants us to do the will of the Father, to be people in personal communion with Him—to be people that He “knows.” This is the pattern of deepening discipleship, to increasingly know the mind and heart of the One we follow and to increasingly reflect that understanding in our living. Not what we say, but what we do. Who we are, from the inside out.

Many of the most impactful disciples I have known have been, in most ways, quite common folks. But in the most important ways they were quite uncommon. They wouldn’t be names you would know. They were laypeople who served without attention, pastors who served smaller congregations. But their lives exuded the character and grace of Christlikeness. It was clear that Jesus knew them because they lived in such close communion with Him. Their prayers reflected an intimacy and familiarity that had become natural to them.

In the end, all will be made clear. Appearances will fade away. Reality will be revealed. There will be some surprises, Jesus tells us. But we can be confident that the disciples that persisted faithfully and pursued kingdom values first will be welcomed and celebrated. Show up every day ready to “play” and take care to do the right things. It turns out that’s not a bad formula for faithful discipleship.

REFLECT **T**his week pray for God to do a “fruit” inspection in your life.

January

23

THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS

*We are called to faithfully share the gospel
in the things we say and do in hopes of a great harvest.*

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
13:1-9**

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

18-23

¹⁸“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²²The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³**But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

Jesus used parables to communicate the truths of His kingdom. By using familiar imagery with new meaning, Jesus is attempting to engage and prompt us. He wants to draw us into the story, as He is portraying it, to make us participants in His story. This session is not intended to simply inform our understanding, but to stimulate our understanding into living.

SOWING SEED

Matthew 13:1-3

Everything that follows proceeds from this: the farmer sowed his seed. It begins with action. The explanations that follow depend on this beginning. Jesus recasts the meaning of this familiar activity (sowing seeds) as a call to share the message about the kingdom of God. We will miss the point if we move too quickly to the description and explanation of the details of the parable. The goal is not to help us have a better understanding of planting—literal seeds or the “seeds” of the kingdom—but to engage us in the task (mission) of spreading the presence and message of the kingdom. We are called to be “sowers.”

We should also be mindful that the “sower” of kingdom “seed” has broader meaning than just personal evangelism (as valuable as that is). It is to live in such a way that our lives reveal and point to the kingdom and what the kingdom has to say about life and living. We should be introducing a new element into the world around us. It may include a dissonance with that world—the witness of a life being lived in a different way.

Sowing the “seed” of the kingdom in our settings looks differently than an ancient farmer’s sowing. We may “sow” by nurturing relationship with non-believers, serving those in need, or being peacemakers in our conflict-filled society. When we bring the presence of the kingdom into our world we are “sowing” kingdom seed.

Did You Know?

Israel's agrarian practices were closely tied to the practice of their faith. See, for example, how farming practices are interwoven into God's prescriptions for Israel (Deuteronomy 14:22-29; 15:19-16:17; 22:9-10). Connecting their work and faith was a normal practice. What would it look like if we connected our work as closely?

SOILS

Matthew 13:4-9, 18-23

Jesus' parable and His explanation of its details include explanations of the meaning of the different types of soil and their responsiveness to the seeds being sown. He may have seen a farmer sowing seed in the distance and directed the crowd to watch him as Jesus told the parable. Whether there was a farmer to be seen, the imagery would have been immediately familiar to His audience. They lived in an agrarian (farming) economy. They would instantly recall scenes of seed-sowing they had seen. Jesus used this to connect meaning about sharing the kingdom.

Different soils produce different results. The point of the parable is not a strategic analysis of preferred "soils." It is helping us to understand that sowing kingdom "seed" is an inherently uncertain project. We can sow the seed, but we can't control the "soil." Unlike the farmer, we can't even clearly identify who will be receptive and who will not. We should realize that there are parts of this process that are out of our control. We are called to be "spreading the seed," regardless of "soil analysis."

There's another aspect to this that is not really illustrated in the parable but is relevant to this conversation. We see it referred to in I Corinthians 3:6. Paul writes, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow." In other words, "sowing seed" may involve multiple layers and multiple people. Not every worker will sow and harvest what they have sown. Some may sow faithfully, but never see the full harvest. Others will harvest where they did not sow. But our task is to be sharing the kingdom, wherever we are in the process, as part of the greater work. The reality is that when someone comes to a commitment to Christ, typically there are a number of people who have contributed along the way—all of which were critical to the final "harvest." All of them had been faithful to be "spreading the seed" in their lives, contributing to the final result.

Think About It

There are different ways to “sow seed” for the kingdom, but we are all called to “sow,” bringing the good news of God to our world.

CELEBRATING THE HARVEST

While our attention may be drawn to the various soils, the primary message of the parable focuses on two things—the sower who sows and the Giver of the harvest, who gives the bountiful harvest. The parable and explanation both end with the dramatic announcement of a surprisingly productive harvest—thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold. This is a clear answer to the uncertainties of sowing and soils. We can’t always know when the “soil” will be receptive, nor will we always witness the “harvest.” Jesus is telling us the “end of the story.” God is the God of the harvest. He will take our often meager efforts and limited “farming” skills and produce a bountiful harvest. We may not be the immediate agent for harvesting and we may not see the harvest happen, but we can know that the (bountiful) harvest is surely coming.

We never “farm” alone. The Holy Spirit is our ever-active partner. He has already been at work in the heart of every person we encounter, drawing them to God. This is what we call prevenient grace, the calling and drawing work of God in every human heart, everywhere. We never actually begin the work. The Holy Spirit is always ahead of us. We never “create” the harvest, for this is God’s work. This is why we can be confident that the bountiful harvest is coming. Not because we are skillful or dedicated, but because He will produce the harvest.

What is the message? If we’re listening, it jumps out at us. “Whoever has ears, let them hear.” Go and sow. God will handle the rest.

REFLECT **W**hat are some of the ways you are “sowing” the presence of the kingdom into the world around you?

CARL LETH

January

30

HEART MATTERS

Jesus transforms us from the inside out.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
15:1-20**

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

³Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ ⁶they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

⁹They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”

KEY VERSES

¹⁰**Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. ¹¹What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”**

¹²Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”

¹³He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”

¹⁶“Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of

the body? ¹⁸But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

TRADITIONS, RESTRICTIONS, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION

Matthew 15:1-2

For too long, the law of God had been reinterpreted in purely physical ways, so that enforcement could be done in direct relationship to the practice of specific rituals. It may be difficult for us to recognize just how powerful and strong the grip of these traditions had upon the people of Jesus' time. They were perpetuated by the powerful influence of the Pharisees, who embodied the religious authorities of the day. The challenge, authority, and ubiquitous presence of religious tradition was inescapable in Jesus' world.

HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER

Matthew 15:3-6

Jesus parries with His questioner by responding with His own question. Further, Jesus' question points to the breaking of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). By elevating their traditions, the religious authorities of Jesus' day had elevated their interpretations to the position reserved only for God.

As the dialogue continues, Jesus cites the fifth commandment to “Honor your father and mother” (Exodus 2:12). The way this conversation unfolds reveals how strenuously Jesus insists on the supremacy of God's law and His power. Here, Jesus was addressing the practice of *Corban* (a human tradition) by which a son could dedicate his earnings to God rather than using it for personal reasons (see Mark 7:11). Sounds spiritual, however, this was used as a way to sidestep a child's responsibility to his parents. In the twisting of sacred Scripture, the religious lead-

Did You Know?

In the hand-washing rituals of Jesus' day, sufficient water to cover at least the middle knuckles of the hand must be used. Water in excess of this amount was considered a blessing.

HYPOCRITES!

LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND

ers were substituting their own tradition for God's immutable law.

Matthew 15:7-9

As we read the text from our position in salvation history, it is clear to us that Jesus was not merely irritated by the superstitious, blind adherence to human traditions. Jesus was incensed by the substitution of such formalism based on empty, powerless, (and increasingly meaningless) traditions for the real power of God. The Word of God is powerful and Jesus knew that real transformation requires the power of God. By nullifying the Word of God, they were also nullifying the power of God's Word. Merely insisting on the ritualistic observation of human tradition, regardless of the fact that some of those traditions were once connected to the law of God, did nothing to effect real transformation. Locked into ritual and tradition-keeping roles, spiritually starved people would only remain in bondage to a self-enriching religious establishment. Their lip-service to the sacred Scriptures only worsened the reality that their hearts were far from the true meaning of God's Word.

The tension between traditions, the ritual ceremonial laws as they were translated into a dizzying array of commands, versus the real power of God as declared by the Son of God, is clear. "Merely human rules..." (Isaiah 29:13), Jesus reminds them, have taken the place properly reserved for the commandments of God. Such rules were destined to perish.

Matthew 15:10-11

There is a fascinating shift in the drama that is playing out at this point. Earlier, Jesus had indulged a question from the Pharisees and religious rulers concerning the tradition of the elders. In this instance, their question goes beyond the external traditions of the community, to the standards of personal righteousness and purity. Jesus has shifted the conversation so that from this point forward, His listeners must

Think About It

The purpose of boundary is for protection. Any rule should be evaluated on the basis of God's Word and its relationship to holy living. On the other hand, when the emphasis is keeping rules and not holy living, even good rules can become empty traditions.

come to terms with the reality associated with the law of God that was often concealed behind the veil of outward traditions and rituals.

SCATHING REBUKE

Matthew 15:12-14

Just when those listening to Jesus thought it couldn't get any more challenging, Jesus offered a scathing rebuke, illustrated by a violent metaphor. Examining the metaphor first, it reminds us of a gardener ruthlessly yanking pesky weeds by the roots out of his/her garden, because they are worthless. Not only are they worthless, they also consume the nutrients of the soil and the water that falls upon it to irrigate the plants that will enrich his/her table as food for his/her family. The message of Jesus was not about enforcing the ritual traditionalism of His era; it was about seeking the kind of purity of heart that honors God by reflecting His character in our world.

INSIDE OUT

Matthew 15:15-20

Sometimes, we can reduce the heart of a parable to a complex principle. Clearly, there are many points of emphasis that enrich the overall meaning of the story and its potential application. In this parable, however, we're looking for that central meaning from which the diverse and varying applications might be made. This fascinating dialogue with both the Pharisees, as well as Jesus' disciples, grants us entry into the understanding of Jesus' message of inward transformation. This connects well with our session truth: Jesus transforms us from the inside out.

REFLECT Take time this week to think about the words you speak.

DAVE FELTER was an author, parish pastor for 21 years, and completed 28 years of service to his denomination as General Editor. Retired, he lives in Overland Park, KS with his wife, Sandra.

February

6

WHAT DO I LACK?

Believers must let go of anything that keeps them from following Christ completely.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
19:16-30**

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

¹⁷“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

¹⁸“Which ones?” he inquired. Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

KEY VERSES

²⁰**“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”** ²¹**Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”** ²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁶Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

²⁷Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

²⁸Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have

followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Matthew 19:16-17

PROBING QUESTION

This man was sincere, because his question to Jesus tellingly reveals his sincerity. He is truly interested in the Master's response. Furthermore, the man is well acquainted with religion in general. He knows the eternal difference between good and evil. He prefers the good, and he is prepared to do another good deed. And this is his dilemma: he mistakenly believes Jesus will acknowledge his goodness to date in the keeping of the commandments and will commend him. Is it a "loaded" question? To some, it may seem that way. Jesus' response, however, saw the presence of mistaken assumptions regarding qualifications for eternal life. The questioner in this story incorrectly assumed that one could earn eternal life. For a good person, or one that is habituated towards goodness, it merely meant continuation in the observance of the law, and perhaps doing another good deed or two. Ironically, Jesus' response is going to be very unsettling.

Instead of the commendation the questioner was expecting, Jesus launched a thunderbolt that would have shaken the most pious individual, right down to their toes.

WHICH ONES?

Matthew 19:18-19

The questioner skillfully shifts the focus of the conversation. He asked Jesus to name the commandments that were to be kept in order to secure eternal life. As we read the script of this conversation, we may be forced to question the earlier assumption that the questioner was indeed legitimately sincere. Notice Jesus' response to his question, and which of the Ten

Did You Know?

Jesus' suggestion that the man sell everything and give to the poor did not characterize Jewish traditions of His time. This act would have reduced him to poverty, which was not recommended by Jewish tradition.

WHAT DO I LACK?

WENT AWAY SAD

Commandments Jesus noted. Jesus listed commandments 6, 7, 8, 9, and 5. Jesus' last command, while not found in the Decalogue, is the second command in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40). As we peruse this list of commands, we quickly note that these commands are the "horizontal" commands. They establish the perimeter of social justice, or social holiness. Immediately, as the questioner heard this listing, he must have uttered a great sigh of relief.

Matthew 19:20-21

Even if our questioner expressed inward relief, something in the tone of Jesus' voice must have triggered a cautious query: "What do I still lack?"

Did this man hear Jesus the time when He went up on a mountainside and taught the people who came out to hear Him? If so, he would have heard Jesus conclude a section of His remarks with those unsettling, anxiety-producing words, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Once again, Jesus brings up the topic: "If you want to be perfect..." However, this time Jesus does not just say be perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect, He clarifies what that means: "If you want to give it all you've got... go sell your possessions; give everything to the poor. All your wealth will then be in heaven. Then come follow me" (19:21, TM).

Matthew 19:22-26

The questioner wasn't the same man when he left the presence of Jesus—stripped of his illusions and pretense. Perhaps in the crowd of those listening to Jesus and rubbing shoulders with His disciples, there was the unspoken question that would have been directed to Jesus: Why didn't He include the 10th commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Perhaps the answer is

Think About It

Jesus' story about the camel going through the eye of the needle is a clear use of hyperbole. Most believe that this is not a reference to a small gate at the time; such a gate did not exist until a later period.

ALL THINGS POSSIBLE

right here: "...he went away sad, because he had great wealth." Perhaps this man was so wealthy, no one else had anything that he did not own or possess himself.

Matthew 19:27-30

History has a unique way of preserving irony. In this sense, the concluding verses of this passage present us with two types of irony. First, there is the dramatic irony readers will infer from the comments of Jesus and the response of Peter. Jesus had just stated the linchpin of the gospel, namely, salvation cannot be earned or merited, but God graciously provides His righteousness and salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord! Peter's incredulous skepticism is revealed when he asks Jesus, "What then will there be for us?" Here is situational irony. While we have no pleasure in probing Peter's query, it does sound remarkably like the man's question to Jesus, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

When Jesus spoke, there was something for everyone. Those, "salt-of-the-earth" folks heard a message of hope and good news, for in it was the promise of the Messiah who was offering them the kingdom of God in the present. For the intellectually curious, there was an invitation to go deeper than a superficial analysis. Jesus' concluding words as recorded here by Matthew offer just such an example. Jesus promises the glories and rewards of the kingdom "...at the renewal of all things..." But as quickly as those words were spoken, Jesus offered an intriguing statement: "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

REFLECT **P**ray for God to show you an area in your life where you might be "lacking" in your spiritual life.

DAVID FELTER

February

13

LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

The abundant grace of God extends equally to all.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
20:1-16**

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

⁷“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

⁸“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

⁹“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

¹³“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.

¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

KEY VERSE ¹⁶**"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."**

ENGAGE THE WORD

DAY'S WAGE

Matthew 20:1-2

In this parable Jesus unpacks the "first and last" (19:30) saying. It focuses on a landowner's generosity (God's generous love), inviting workers in to his field.

The parable begins by pointing out: A day's wage for a day's work. The first group of laborers earned the standard wage for the standard amount of labor.

FAIR WAGE

Matthew 20:3-4

There is an abrupt change here. "Go work in my vineyard...I will pay you whatever is right." What happened to the standard formula of a fair wage for a day's work? Does the absence of a specific amount designated for the wages to be earned indicate a sliding scale of wages based on hours worked, productivity, or profitability of the laborers? The master of the vineyard simply addresses them with the instruction, ". . . go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right."

GO WORK!

Matthew 20:5-7

It is interesting here that the initial invitation to unemployed workers has greatly changed. Now there is no mention or description of the wage to be earned by the workers. There is also a shift in the tone employed by the landowner. Initially, he was simply seeking the unemployed to work in his fields. Now, he chides the day-laborers, "Why have you been standing here all day long, doing nothing?" Is this another metaphor, this time, describing those who have not sought employment, but rather, have waited on the initiatives of others to remedy their situation?

PAY WHAT THEY'RE OWED

Matthew 20:8

These words easily conjure up images of the great

Did You Know?

Jewish law mandated that laborers be paid the same day. Typically, a denarius was the equivalent to what it would cost to live just one day.

judgment day when all shall be called to give an account. In this parable, Jesus uses a telling turn of speech: “When evening came...” Does this metaphor suggest the time of accounting...when the day is over...the work is done...and the laborers now await payday? Add to this, another condition. Jesus suggests the dramatic element of separating the groups by the time of their hiring. The workers are clumped together in the order of their hiring. The last ones hired must step forward in order to receive their payment. In the parable, Jesus notes that the landowner simply instructs his foreman to, “. . . pay them their wages . . .” The time for negotiation is over. The agreement between the worker and the employer is settled, and now it is time to complete the transaction.

ALL PAID THE SAME **Matthew 20:9-12**

If we stay with the thought that Jesus is actually sharing a parable about those conditions that will exist on the great day of divine judgment, He reveals an interesting twist in the story. To note that Jesus describes the tension between the wages earned by those who worked the least and those who worked the most, is loaded with implication and significance. This tension is to be expected if we are merely looking at the algorithms of economic policy in the workplace. Indeed, Jesus must have known that this model of employment and wage administration would surely raise questions. Most people, including both workers and employers, would argue that there is something inherently unfair about this model. Those who worked more hours would surely be compensated accordingly, while those working fewer hours would acknowledge the fairness of a smaller wage in return for fewer hours worked.

GOD’S GRACE

Matthew 20:13-15

For all who are imprisoned in the processes of a *quid pro quo* social construct, reciprocity (mutual actions) demands equality and fairness of an exacting

Think About It

Wealthy people often bestowed gifts upon the poor and this drew praise. However, because status defined roles in ancient society, those who complained about receiving a day's wage for a day's work would be viewed as rude and ungrateful.

THE GREAT REVERSAL

degree. But this is not about reciprocity. This parable is about the grace of God that was being revealed in the incarnate Son of God who was standing among the people, sharing an all-too familiar story to illustrate that grace. This parable stresses that God is in debt to no one; thus every gift from Him is an extension of His grace.

The One whom they are hearing described in this parable is extravagantly generous, and throws out the principle of reciprocity in favor of the wild generosity of pure grace! The God of all grace has reached down, giving us the unfathomable grace of our Lord, who has taken our sins, redeeming us from sin's penalty by offering himself as the redeeming sacrifice on the cross.

Matthew 20:16

The gravity of this statement is concealed in its brevity and simplicity. It is a powerful, almost foreboding, comment from the lips of the Son of God regarding the future. And that future was beginning at that very moment! In that moment, Jesus gave notice to all who were listening that a tumultuous change was taking place with His appearance as the long-awaited Messiah.

The "last will be first, and the first will be last." In this parable, the workers first hired, may well be metaphorical Israel. Surely, they would always be first in God's eyes, if the laws of reciprocity prevailed. But here is Jesus, ushering in the era of grace that rewards those with the least time in the kingdom's vineyards on the same scale as those whose labors within it are from the beginning. The Messiah has just turned the world upside down!

REFLECT Take time this week to thank God for His grace.

February

20

THE GREAT BANQUET

God invites everyone into the kingdom.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
22:1-14**

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

⁴“Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

⁵“But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. ⁶The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

⁸“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ ¹⁰**So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.**

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹²He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

¹³“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

¹⁴“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

A WEDDING BANQUET

Matthew 22:1-3

While many parables appear to have a central, controlling focus or motif, something different seems to be going in this story. This parable offers a rather complex setting of both characters, responses, and the overarching significance of the event to which the parabolic story is connected. There is a king, with a son, whose marriage is about to occur. Accompanying this event is a wedding banquet that embodies the cultural customs of that era. In addition to these elements, there are the servants who have been assigned the responsibility of inviting, securing, or providing guests for the event. Finally, there are the responses of the invited guests who employ a wide ranging array of excuses for not accepting the invitations.

GETTING READY

Matthew 22:4

At this point in the parable, there is a sense of urgency that is quite apparent. The father of the son whose wedding banquet is nearing, adds compelling information that is to be shared with those on the guest list. The dinner has been prepared. The menu has not only been planned, every detail associated with the menu has been cared for. No other detail remains unaddressed. The invitation script ends with a powerful invitation which in the original language may be read as, "Come...come now!"

INVITEES

Matthew 22:5-7

The structure of events that continue to unfold in this drama is astounding. The critical phrase in this section of the narrative is, "But they paid no attention and went off." Obviously, there were different reactions within the invitees on the guest list. Some simply ignored the invitation, going off to their fields or businesses. They simply had little to no interest in the king, his son, or a wedding banquet. This benign disinterest was a far-cry from the aggressive malevolence

Did You Know?

Wedding feasts were very frequently large gatherings. Wealthy persons could invite the whole community to attend. These occasions could last up to seven days.

NEW GUEST LIST

DRESS PROPERLY

of other invitees. And the consequences were drastic. It is clear that punishment fell upon the ungrateful and rebellious guests. Force was met with force. The killing of the king's servants was met with scorched-earth retaliation.

Matthew 22:8-10

The king is in no mood to put the wedding on hold, or even reschedule it around the flimsy preferences of the guest list. The rejection of those on the original guest list has caused the king to seemingly move to "Plan B." If the original invitees wish to reject an unencumbered invitation to the wedding banquet of the son of their ruler, then the king will make a new guest list. Clearly, the idea of scrapping the guest list, at the last moment, and then expanding the list to, well, anyone, is astonishing. What's more, the king makes no distinctions concerning the qualifications of the new list of invitees. They can be pillars of society, or down-and-outers. His servants are to invite anyone and everyone they meet!

Matthew 22:11-14

On the surface, one might ask, "Well, what did you expect?" If one opens the invitation to everyone the odds are high that someone will attend the wedding improperly dressed. And this is exactly why Jesus used parables. This dark ending to the parable forces us to go back and reread the story. In Jesus' day, His listeners would have stood in groups rehearsing the parable, trying to figure out what to make of a story with such a chilling ending.

Could this parable actually be a story about the Jewish people and their relationship to God, their prophets, and now, God's Son who was standing before them? If they were truly listening with their hearts, they would hear echoes of their own history and God's magnificent grace leading them out of Egypt, giving them the land, the law, the sacrifices, and the

Think About It

Jesus' allusion to the burning of the city (v. 7) could very well have been a pointer to the terrible destruction of Jerusalem that would occur in AD 70.

prophets. Would they not remember their continuous failures of disobedience and the retributive judgment of God in their captivity and bondage? Would they not remember the poignant appeals of their prophets, calling them to return, repent, and renewal? Now the King has sent His only begotten Son, inviting them to enter the kingdom of God. They are simply urged to come . . . come now!

In verse 10 we read: "So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests." And this is why the guest was summarily dismissed. When the servants were gathering all the people they could find, they were also providing them everything they needed to attend the wedding banquet. None would be embarrassed by the clothing or apparel he or she was wearing. They were given proper attire for admittance and participation in the grand event of the wedding banquet.

The kingdom of heaven was all about God's incredible grace. God's invitation to the wedding banquet in the kingdom was not dependent on anything or any claim guests could make. Indeed, these guests from unexpected quarters would be given even the attire that would both welcome them and identify them as guests of the King.

"Many are invited but few are chosen" (v. 14). To be "invited" as used by Matthew here, is to be one who has received the invitation to become a member of a select group—God's people. To be "chosen" identifies those who respond positively to the privileges of God's grace and trust in Him for salvation. They become a part of the community of believers.

REFLECT **W**hat might God be inviting you to today?

DAVID FELTER

February

27

KEEP WATCH

*We must cultivate godly character
in preparation for Christ's return.*

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
25:1-13**

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

⁶“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

⁷“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

⁹“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

¹¹“Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

¹²“But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

¹³“**Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

FIVE FOOLISH, FIVE WISE

Matthew 25:1-4

Once again Jesus addresses the crowds following Him with another parable. In the parable, the 10 virgins would most likely have been bridesmaids. It was a singular honor to be invited to be a bridesmaid. Further, most weddings were held in the evening, so there was the necessity of torches and the oil necessary to keep them burning.

It is possible that during the day of the wedding, there would have been much festivity. The central feature of the wedding would have been during the evening hours, when the call would be made that the bridegroom was coming. This was a signal to the bridesmaids that they were to go to meet the bridegroom and escort him to the home of his bride.

There were no street lights or sidewalks. In this darkness, the bridesmaids would have used torches to illuminate the way for the bridegroom to proceed to the home of his bride. Most likely these torches would have simply been sticks with oil-soaked rags which would have probably only burned for a short while, when they were re-soaked with oil and ignited to provide light. Thus, we will see why one half of the bridesmaids were called “foolish” and the other half were called “wise.”

HERE'S THE BRIDEGROOM

Matthew 25:5-9

The wedding ceremony would take place at the home of the groom's parents. When the call came that the bridegroom was coming, the bridesmaids would hurriedly go to meet him. As mentioned, their task was to provide light or illumination as they escorted the groom to the home of his bride's parents. Since the hour had grown much later than anticipated, the bridesmaids were sleeping.

While the text refers to the bridesmaids “trimming their lamps,” the original language of the text uses a term that describes hand-held torches rather than

Did You Know?

The invitation to be a bridesmaid was such a high honor, that to refuse it would be a terrible insult to the bride as well as to the family of the groom.

traditional lamps, which would have had an oil reservoir and mounted on a lampstand. When the sleeping bridesmaids awakened, it is most likely that their torches would have stopped burning. After all, they were simple torches made up of oil-soaked rags, and ignited. The most pressing need would have been for additional oil with which to soak the rags in order to provide illumination.

The response of those bridesmaids, who were fortunate enough to have a supply of oil, is to be expected. And this leads us to a description of those whom the parable designates as “foolish bridesmaids.”

BE PREPARED!

Matthew 25:10-13

The moment of truth has arrived. Even though the bridegroom arrived very late, the call went out to alert all members of the wedding party that the final, joyful moments of the pre-wedding ceremony were about to begin. This was a call for everyone who would be accompanying the groom in the festal procession.

Seeing their torches unlit, and knowing they had no reserve oil to reignite them, the foolish bridesmaids sought resources. Gaining nothing from their counterparts whose torches were now already illuminated, they sought alternatives. Tradition tells us that on some occasions, a small shop, knowing that a large wedding event would be taking place, might stay open to accommodate just such emergencies. Whether the foolish bridesmaids found additional oil, we are not told. But we are told that when the foolish bridesmaids returned to the groom’s parents’ home, the door was shut (v. 10). They had missed the processional, and the wedding party was now inside the home of the parents of the groom. In this setting, the text does not nearly convey the significance of what this meant. Literally, the door was bolted from the inside with a very large, noisome bolt that when slid into place, made the premises virtually impenetrable.

We must keep in mind that the central emphasis of

Think About It

Keep watch! These words are as relevant today as they were at the time of Jesus. Today's parable cautioned the people then, as it does to us today, that we must be prepared—live ready—for Jesus' return.

this parable is readiness. With this in mind, consider the actions of the five foolish virgins in this story. We can note several deficiencies in their preparation and actions.

First, and the most obvious, they were unprepared for a lengthy wait between the conclusion of the day-long festivities, and the arrival of the bridegroom. Perhaps they didn't understand the necessity of adequate preparation. Perhaps they had never been bridesmaids. Whatever may be said, the vignette that occurs when the call comes that the bridegroom has arrived, reveals a fatal lack of preparation.

Second, they made false assumptions. Not only did they assume their level of preparation was adequate, they assumed that in a "worst-case scenario," something would work out to resolve any unexpected problems. What surprise they must have felt when the other bridesmaids refused to share their valuable oil. Immediately, the full impact of inadequate preparations, and resting on false assumptions would have hit them squarely. Circumstances have left them desperate.

Third, as we read this story and reflect upon the setting, the characters, and the significance of the combined elements of this important wedding, another shortcoming presents itself: They were not really focused on their task as bridesmaids. Considering the honor bestowed upon them in being invited to serve as a bridesmaid, one has to wonder if instead of responding with adequate preparations, they got caught up in the festivities.

No one knows when Jesus, the bridegroom, will return. In light of this, we must live in readiness, vigilance, preparation, and faithfulness.

REFLECT

As you reflect on this passage, what do you take away from this eminently serious message?

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one to memorize each month or memorize one of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Winter 2021-22:

Jeremiah 23:5-6

Matthew 7:1-2

Matthew 7:13-14

COMING NEXT QUARTER

SPRING 2022

Unit 1: Tragedy and Triumph (Psalms)

The Psalms can be devotional expressions that help us see and find God. The seven-week journey will prepare our hearts for Easter by focusing and reflecting on selected psalms.

Unit 2: The Ministry of Paul in Acts

Following Paul's dramatic conversion, he became a person with a burning sense of mission. During this study, we will look at the ministry of Paul in the book of Acts.



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