



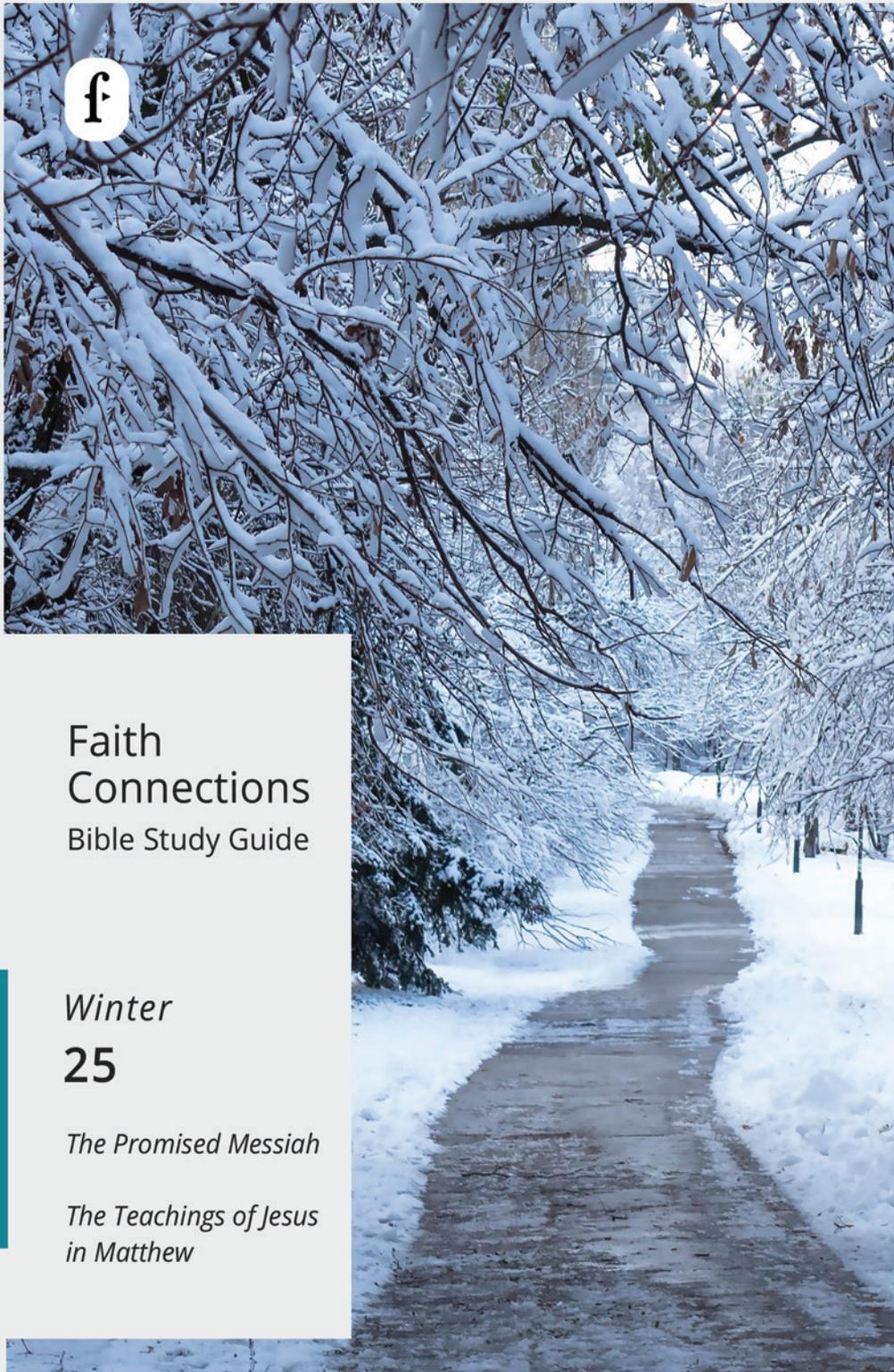
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Faith
Connections
Bible Study Guide

Winter
25

The Promised Messiah

*The Teachings of Jesus
in Matthew*



Bible Study Guide

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Winter 2025-26
Volume 49, Number 2

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Mike L. Wonch
Editor

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Perspectives

Being Teachable

Maybe you have heard the saying, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” This idiom points to the person who is so set in his/her ways for so long that it is hard for that person to learn something new. Have you ever encountered people who were so entrenched in his/her way of doing things that nothing you said or did would convince them that there was a new way to accomplish a task or something new to learn?

During Jesus’ time, the Pharisees were a religious group who were known for their piety and close adherence to all the laws (600 plus) of the Torah. Time after time, when Jesus had a run in with these people, there was a moment when He spoke (taught) truth to them, but they refused to listen. They closed their eyes, ears, and hearts, believing they knew it all.

There is a danger of getting to a place on our spiritual journey where we feel there is nothing more to learn and/or no more room to grow. However, we are called to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord” (2 Peter 3:18) and “go on to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1), continuing to live our “lives in him, rooted and built up in him” (Colossians 2:6-7a). This means that as believers we are to never stop learning, we are to never stop growing.

A good way for our knowledge, understanding, and faith to increase is by fostering a teachable mindset. Being teachable simply means a willingness to learn and grow. Here are a few keys:

- **Realize there is always more to learn.** Even if you have heard the same Bible story numerous times, open yourself up to hear the story in a fresh, new way. Ask: *What is God saying to me through His Word today?*
- **Understand the need for growth.** Consider where you’ve been, where you are, and where you want to go in terms of your spiritual journey. Ask: *In what ways, with God’s help, can I develop a more mature faith?*
- **Open yourself up to the Holy Spirit’s leading.** Each day, be sensitive to the Spirit’s guidance in your life. Ask: *Where is God leading me today?*

As you read and reflect on each passage, be teachable—seeking to become more mature in your faith, “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

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

MIKE WONCH
Editor

December

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THE PROMISE FORETOLD

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

THE WORD

ISAIAH
42:1–9

KEY VERSE

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

²He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

³A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

⁴he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

⁵This is what God the LORD says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

⁶“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

⁸“I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.

⁹See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

GOD'S SERVANT

Isaiah 42:1-4

God, in redemptive purpose and promise, declares a Servant is coming who will bring “justice to the nations” (v. 1). Along with his purpose, the character of this Servant is also clear, for he will be “upheld” and “chosen” by God, one that God “delights” in, and a bearer of God’s Spirit (v.1). We might pick up here echoes of Mark 1:10-11 and the baptism of Jesus. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, the Spirit descended on Him like a dove. Then, the voice from heaven proclaimed, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Just like the Servant’s description in Isaiah, Jesus is revealed as one who bears the Spirit, is chosen by God, and is loved by God. The significant point here is that the Servant, in every way, fully represents both the character and mission of God.

It is the character and mission of God that brings hope to Isaiah’s message. The Servant does not come to break “bruised reeds” or snuff out “smoldering wicks” (v. 3), but comes with a heart of compassion and healing. In our brokenness and frailty, we are assured the Lord remembers we are dust and yet looks on us with compassion as a father does his children (Psalm 103:13-14). God always meets us where we are, bringing healing grace and redemption. It is this heart of redemption that defines the mission of God’s Servant. In faithfulness, he will bring about justice for all of the earth (vv. 3-4). Justice means to set things right, to restore them to God’s good intentions and purpose. We are promised the Servant will faithfully pursue this mission until it is complete, for “he will not falter or be discouraged” until God’s justice is fully established on the earth (v. 4). Despite what we might see in our world at the moment, we know that because of Christ (the Servant), the justice, healing, and beauty of “new creation” will come in all of its fullness (see Revelation 21:1-8). We carry with us the hope

Did You Know?

The word for justice in this passage (*mishpat*) can also mean the quality of “rectitude” or “righteousness.” Biblically, righteousness cannot be separated from the desire for justice, or setting things right in the world.

GOD’S PEOPLE

of Advent, for through the One that has come and is coming again, God’s intention for creation will not fail.

Isaiah 42:5-7

God’s desire for healing and justice in the world, as embodied in Jesus, also speaks to our call as God’s people. In verses 5-7 of the passage, God speaks to His covenant people. Just as the Servant reflects the character and mission of God, so too should God’s people. They have been called in “righteousness” (v. 6), and those made righteous will seek to make things right in the world around them. While the task might appear overwhelming, the people of God do not walk in their own power, but God “takes hold” of their hand and “keeps” them, empowering them to be a “light for the Gentiles” (v. 6), a reflection of God’s grace, justice, and mercy to the world around them. This is truly our divine vocation as human beings, as the creation narrative in Genesis 1 teaches us. We were created in the image of God so that we might be a reflection of God to all of creation.

God’s people are to be agents of healing, bringing sight to the blind, setting captives free, and bringing light into the dungeons of darkness (v. 7). We cannot help but make connection here to Jesus’ declaration of His own purpose and mission in Luke 4:16-19. There, in a Nazareth synagogue, Jesus read from Isaiah the prophet and boldly proclaimed that the promise of deliverance was fulfilled in Him. The one who humbled himself, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7), brought good news of the Lord’s favor revealed in healing and justice. As the body of Christ, we are the continuing incarnational expression, or the embodiment, of Jesus in the world. His character is the character we reflect; His mission is the mission we commit ourselves to. We, too, must proclaim the Lord’s love and mercy through lives offered in service to the world’s healing and the pursuit of justice.

Think About It

The Servant of the Lord in this passage comes without clamoring or noise (v. 2), but brings about justice in faithfulness. Loud proclamations fall empty without the faithful embodiment of God's healing and justice.

Isaiah 42:8-9

There is no denying the world's present state, the brokenness that bears the fruit of oppression, injustice, pain, and loss. While this could leave us in a state of hopelessness or despair, God's declaration enables us to see beyond the present moment. Our God is the Lord, a glory that no others share (v. 8), and our God is in the business of declaring "new things" (v. 9). The former things do not have the last word; the God of healing and justice does. Isaiah's message of hope had much to say to the people of Judah who suffered in exile, but it also speaks a much-needed word to all of us. The pain of exile takes many forms and each day we find ourselves surrounded by a world that is longing for rescue. But there is good news—our faithful God has declared what will be and nothing will defeat His promise. We can, through the eyes of faith, look to the day when God proclaims in final fulfillment, "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

While the message of Isaiah the prophet began with warnings of judgment to the people of Judah (Isaiah 1:2-13), the people were not left without hope. The heart of God is one of compassion and mercy, one determined to set the world right. This is the hope we share in the season of Advent. In this moment, we might be experiencing the pain of a world in exile or the grief that flows from injustice. Yet, we are not without hope. The Servant of the Lord has come and is coming again, and He will not falter until justice is established on the earth.

GOD'S INTENTION**REFLECT**

In what ways can you share in God's mission of healing and justice in your world this week?

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December

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BELIEVING THE PROMISE

God calls His people to overcome fear through radical obedience.

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

This passage from Matthew's gospel gives attention to the perspective of Joseph, and throughout the story both he and Mary displayed a willingness to be faithful to God's call even in the face of potential consequences. Their stories remind us that obedience

might be costly, but it always leads to a life of true meaning, sharing in God's redemptive purposes.

FAITHFUL IN COMPASSION

Check out the article, *The Quiet Folk*, on page 52.

Matthew 1:18-19

Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, a binding legal arrangement that could only be broken by death or divorce. When Mary was found to be pregnant, Joseph, not yet knowing the true nature of the pregnancy, responded as one faithful to the law (v. 19) and sought a divorce, treating this as an act of adultery as the law required. Yet, while being faithful to the spirit of the law and its demands, Joseph did not allow the letter of the law to diminish his heart of grace and mercy. Although he had every legal right to pursue a public divorce and seek compensation, bringing shame to Mary and her family, Joseph opted to handle the matter privately (v. 19). It is important to remember that he made this decision before he knew the true story of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph, at that point, had no reasonable explanation other than unfaithfulness on Mary's part. Despite what he believed to be true in that moment, Joseph still responded in grace. Faithful people do more than keep the letter of the law; they embody the heart and character of God's law.

In reading Matthew's gospel, we come to see that Joseph's response to Mary's assumed failure stands in stark contrast to the posture of the religious leaders Jesus encountered in His ministry. In their commitment to the letter of the law, the religious leaders abandoned the greater values of love, mercy, and compassion. Jesus repeatedly pushed back against their legalistic and judgmental isolationism, choosing instead to share the table with tax collectors even before they repented (Matthew 9:10; Luke 19:5), healing the servant of an "unclean" Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10), and showing mercy to a woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). Jesus was clear in His words and actions that God "desires

Did You Know?

Jesus is a form of the name Joshua, who was the successor of Moses. The idea that Jesus follows and fulfills the role of Moses is also an important theme throughout Matthew's gospel.

FAITHFUL IN LISTENING

mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13). We, too, can easily fall into the trap of self-righteousness, allowing our adherence to the letter of the law to become a barrier to redemptive relationships. Joseph serves as an example for us by not allowing the letter of the law to crush his spirit of mercy and compassion.

Matthew 1:20-23

The turning point in Joseph's story was a dream that became a divine encounter (v. 20). An angel appeared and assured him that Mary's pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit (v. 20) and the son she would bear would save people from their sins (v. 21). God was at work in this, doing what God had promised to do. The deliverer was coming, one named Jesus and called Immanuel (vv. 21-22), for God is faithfully and redemptively present with us. Joseph heard from God and that changed everything. This does not mean that Joseph understood it all or had every question answered. Most certainly he did not! What he heard from the angel was, in so many ways, beyond our natural understanding or comprehension as human beings. Complete understanding and having all the answers is not what changed the direction of the story. The story turns on the fact that Joseph heard from God.

Listening is essential to the life of faithfulness. We must live, as Joseph did, in a place of openness to what God has to say to us. In a world full of noise and busyness, we often fall into patterns of distraction that keep us from listening. So, the question is whether we are creating space in our lives to hear from God. Are we practicing the spiritual disciplines that help us to "be still and know" (Psalm 46:10)? But, as this story reminds us, hearing from God does not necessarily mean all of our questions will be answered or that we know exactly how things will turn out. Sometimes what God calls us to does not make sense on paper. The math did not add up when Jesus told the disciples to feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two

Think About It

Mary and Joseph chose to trust God and follow in obedience even without all of the answers. At times, our desire for understanding and answers before we obey can often serve as an avoidance of trust.

FAITHFUL IN OBEDIENCE

Check out the article, *Jesus' Genealogy In Matthew*, on page 54.

fish (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14). However, when we have the certainty that God has spoken, it gives us the courage to take the next step.

Matthew 1:24-25

Listening falls short if it is not followed by obedience. Here again, Joseph serves as an example of faithfulness: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife" (v. 24). Joseph did what God asked him to do, taking Mary as his wife and giving the name Jesus to the son who was born (v. 25). By naming him, Joseph adopted Jesus into the Davidic genealogy that Matthew delineated in the first part of this chapter. A deliverer, in the line of David, was born. This is indeed a miraculous birth and the fulfillment of divine promise, and yet critical to this redemption story is the faithful obedience of two ordinary people, Mary and Joseph. Their obedience, given the possible appearance of impropriety that came with it, was not without risk in a culture shaped by honor and shame. Mary and Joseph, however, were willing to risk it all for the sake of faithfulness and so became a part of God's redemption story.

In reflecting on the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph, we cannot help but think of the words Jesus spoke years later: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). Obedience to God's call can be costly, as it was for Mary and Joseph, but faithfulness always leads to a life of true meaning and purpose in God's story.

REFLECT

In what ways are you creating space in your life to hear from God today?

December

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THE PROMISE FULFILLED

Jesus is King over all people of the earth.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
2:1–12**

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.

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

Jesus' birth narrative, as recorded in Matthew's gospel, reminds us that God is present and working in all the world, and sometimes it is those we least expect who seek and worship Him.

GOD OF THE NATIONS

Matthew 2:1-2

The opening verse introduces us to magi who followed a star to Jerusalem. Little information is given as to their identity, and we are simply told they came from "the east" (v. 1). We do not know exactly where they came from or how many there were, but the word "magi" generally refers to a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian astrologers and interpreters of dreams. The appearance of an unusual star indicated to these astrologers that a new ruler of great significance had been born, and they made their way to Jerusalem, the seat of political and religious authority, to worship this "king of the Jews" (v. 2).

Two things are striking in these opening verses. First, the magi who came looking to worship the new king were Gentiles, and not simply Gentiles. They were about as far removed from Jewish heritage and worldview as one could be. They were outsiders religiously, ethnically, and culturally. This, however, leads us to the second striking element in the story. God spoke to the magi where they were, through a means they could understand, and they responded. The outsiders came looking for Jesus to worship Him. From the beginning of Jesus' story, the dividing walls between races, cultures, and ethnicities were breaking down. Already, we see God's mission to all the world anticipated. Here in Matthew's birth narrative, we are given a glimpse of what we will see more clearly in the book of Acts when the Holy Spirit falls on both Jew and Gentile (Acts 2:1-12; 10:44-48), tearing down the categories of division and separation (Galatians 3:28-29; Ephesians 2:14).

Did You Know?

In Matthew's time, a Jewish objection to Jesus being the Messiah was the fact that He was from Nazareth and not Bethlehem. This could be why Matthew highlights the birthplace of Jesus in the story.

RIVAL KINGDOMS

Matthew 2:3-8

While the magi responded to the star with a journey that led to worship, others did not receive the announcement of the new king's birth in the same spirit. King Herod, upon hearing the news, was "disturbed" (v. 3). Backed by Rome, Herod's rule was resented by those who wanted a king of full Jewish blood and one who was not a puppet of the Romans. To clarify the picture even further, Herod was a paranoid leader, always on the lookout for anyone—even in his own family—who might usurp his power. His suspicions typically elicited a violent response. From the poisoned well of his disposition, Herod found out from the chief priests and teachers of the law where the Messiah was to be born (v. 4). Receiving the answer of Bethlehem, he sent the magi to seek out the new king on his behalf so he might (supposedly) "worship him" as well (v. 8). We should note in Herod's deception the common temptation to cover selfish and corrupted agendas with spiritual and religious language.

It is interesting to note that Herod was not the only one disturbed, but "all of Jerusalem with him" (v. 3). Not only was the political apparatus disturbed, but the common people and the religious hierarchy as well. Certainly, any whisper of a new king and the potential rebellion that could ensue would unnerve all those in secure positions of authority. There is also a bit of foreshadowing here as well. Matthew is looking ahead to the conflicts Jesus will have with the religious rulers throughout His ministry, which culminated in the crucifixion and their rejection of Him as the Messiah. The contrast here is stark and intentional. While the "outsiders" (the magi) came looking to worship the new king, the "insiders" (the religious rulers of Israel) fail to see what God is doing.

Matthew, in these few verses, establishes the reality of rival kingdoms. Herod and the leaders of Jerusalem represent the "principalities and powers" (Ephesians 6:12) at work in the world, those that resist the king-

Think About It

From the beginning of Jesus' story, the grace of God was reaching beyond the boundaries and divisions that humans create. We must take time to recognize that God is still present and working in surprising places.

WORSHIP OF THE TRUE KING

ship and reign of Christ. In contrast, those who bow in worship, acknowledging the universal lordship and reign of Jesus, belong to another kingdom, one that is eternal. As citizens of another kingdom, they live in hope and confidence, knowing that God's kingdom will come in its fullness (Revelation 21:1-4).

Matthew 2:9-12

The magi continued their star-led journey until they found Jesus and His mother, Mary (v. 11). Their immediate response was the one they intended when they began their quest. They came to worship, and so they worshiped. Different allegorical interpretations have been applied to the gifts they offered (v. 11), but it is sufficient to know that all the gifts were common and appropriate offerings to royalty. This was a recognition of the kingship of Jesus, which is the heart of our worship as well. As we offer ourselves in worship, we proclaim that Jesus Christ is King and Lord over all that is, including our own lives, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11).

There is another significant lesson we can learn from the journey of the magi. Not only did they follow the star, but they ended up following the Scriptures as well. The revelation of the star was used by God to motivate them to make the journey toward this new king, but it was Scripture that pointed them to Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus (vv. 5-6). There is a deep truth in this for our own journey. God speaks through many different means, but we cannot underestimate the role of Scripture in the life of faith. The Bible reveals Jesus to us, points us toward Jesus, and serves as a means of grace forming us into the image of Jesus.

REFLECT **T**hink about what it means to worship Jesus as King.

December

28

THE BEATITUDES

Jesus invites us, regardless of our circumstances, to experience life in the kingdom of God.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
5:1–12**

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.

He said:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

KEY VERSES

¹¹“**Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

ENGAGE THE WORD

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Matthew 5:1-2

Jesus was led by the Spirit “into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” for 40 days (Matthew 4:1-2). Emerging victorious over Satan in the wilderness, Jesus went to “Galilee of the Gentiles” (4:12-16) to fulfill Israel’s calling to be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; see 9:1-2). “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matthew 4:17). Matthew twice summarizes Jesus’ activities in Galilee as teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23; 9:35). Matthew 4:23 describes Jesus’ message as “the good news of the kingdom.”

“Large crowds” of people responded to Jesus’ ministry in Galilee (4:23-25; 5:1). As interested onlookers, crowds gawked from the sidelines, but Matthew stresses that the message of chapters 5—7 was intended for “His disciples” (5:1-2). His message here is not evangelistic preaching of a sermon, but teaching. He was not explaining what people needed to do to become disciples. He was not laying down a new law, more rigorous than the Law of Moses. But, the mention of Jesus’ ascent up the mountain (see Exodus 19:3; 24:16) assigns His teaching a Moses-like authority (see Matthew 7:28-29).

Jesus was teaching those who had already repented and proven their longing for the kingdom’s coming by following Him. In Matthew 5—7, He was not prescribing the kingdom’s entrance requirements. He taught about the possibilities of grace, describing life within the kingdom for those who embraced it.

THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

Matthew 5:3-10

Christians label the opening words of the “Sermon” (“the Beatitudes”) from the Latin word for “blessed.” The Greek word translated “blessed” in Matthew normally recognizes the happiness of people resulting from their favorable circumstances or winning dispositions. But Jesus paradoxically celebrated the good

Did You Know?

To understand the “Sermon on the Mount,” we must read it within its context in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew begins with a genealogy (1:1-17), emphasizing Jesus’ Jewish ancestry—as a descendant of Abraham—and His royal messianic credentials—as a descendant of King David (see 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42).

fortune of those who lacked the conventional prerequisites for happiness—a reversal of fortunes. (Is the kingdom of heaven upside-down? Or, is this world’s value-system upside-down from God’s perspective?)

Verse 3: Jesus described those who are impoverished in spirit—spiritual beggars—as blessed because they’ve recognized God’s right to rule. They humbly realize that they don’t deserve God’s grace. This is the essential condition for receiving it (see Isaiah 66:2). By renouncing their right to rule, they shared in the blessedness of God’s rule.

Verse 4: That “those who mourn” are happy seems particularly ironic. But Jesus assured those sorry for their sins and the sins of others that God would comfort them in the future (see Isaiah 40:1; 61:2-3). Jesus’ healing mission (Matthew 3:23; 9:35; 11:28) offered a foretaste of the wholeness disciples could expect when the kingdom comes in its fullness.

Verse 5: Jesus alluded to God’s promises in Psalm 37:11-13 and Isaiah 61:1-2. The world considers unimpressive gentle, humble, meek, and kind people to be hopeless losers—they will get nothing. But Jesus claimed that their refusal to make themselves important qualified them in God’s sight to rule the renewed earth (see Revelation 5:10; 20:6; 22:5).

Verse 6: Jesus assured those fervently seeking to live lives of moral integrity and justice that God would completely satisfy their longing to see right prevail, when He asserts His rule in this fallen world-order.

Verse 7: Jesus said God will show mercy to people who extend to others godlike undeserved kindness, love, and grace.

Verse 8: Jesus promised those whose central motivation is pure and undivided the blessings of life in the intimate, eternal presence of God (see Psalm 24:4-5; Exodus 33:15-16; Ezekiel 30:24-28).

Verse 9: Jesus pronounced those who seek the comprehensive well-being of all, even enemies, will be recognized by others as reflections of the character

Think About It

In the Beatitudes, Jesus gave a picture of successful Christian living. It is not a picture of uninterrupted prosperity in terms of health, wealth, or social status. Rather, it is a picture of those who live in a world that contains inescapable suffering, yet none of these difficulties keep them from experiencing God's blessing or from living for Him. Regardless of our pain, we can know peace, fulfillment, and genuine joy that are found only in God.

REJOICING IN PERSECUTION

of “the God of peace” (Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9). This blessing applies to peacemakers, not to the merely peaceable or peaceful.

Verse 10: Jesus identified the most unlikely recipients of the happiness of “the kingdom of heaven” as those who are persecuted for living in the way God considers right and holy.

Matthew 5:11-12

The Beatitude in verse 11 (see Luke 6:20-23) elaborates on the ways Jesus' disciples could expect to experience undeserved suffering—persecution, insults, lies, and “all kinds of evil” (5:10). But Jesus pronounced them blessed nonetheless. The same reversal of fortunes He had promised in the earlier Beatitudes would enable them to “rejoice and be glad” (v. 12). They would join the company of blessed prophets similarly persecuted in the past (2 Kings 17:13-14; 2 Chronicles 36:16; see 23:21, 27; Acts 7:52).

Jesus preached the same message as had John the Baptist, focused on repentance and the coming kingdom (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). John's frank preaching had already led to his imprisonment (4:12), and soon to his execution (14:1-12). So, Jesus had good reason to expect much the same fate (see 16:21-28; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:67-68; 27:27-31). In the interests of full disclosure, He warned His disciples, “because of me,” you too may be persecuted (v. 12; see 10:17-19; 16:24-27). But “your reward in heaven” will be great.

REFLECT

Take time to read through the Beatitudes several times this week. Be sure to allow time for contemplation.

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January

4

BEING SALT, BEING LIGHT, BEING TRANSPARENT

Our lives must point to Christ.

THE WORD

MATTHEW
5:13–16

“**Y**ou are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶**In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**

KEY VERSE

MATTHEW
6:1–4

¹“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

ENGAGE THE WORD

SALT AND LIGHT

Matthew 5:13-16

Today's passage explains who disciples were called to be and what they were to do in this world, living among other people. Jesus defined their new identity and mission on earth as representatives of God on earth with two metaphors: "You are the salt of the earth" (v. 13); "You are the light of the world" (v. 14).

The law is fulfilled (5:17) when it is embodied in lives of love, faithfulness, mercy, justice, and so on. For this reason, Jesus' identified disciples, who actually live out the law's intent, as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

In antiquity, salt was sometimes used to disinfect wounds and preserve food, but primarily for seasoning. Only a third of the Dead Sea "salt" used for cooking in ancient Galilee was pure NaCl. In storage, true salt was more easily washed away than the other minerals recovered by evaporating Dead Sea water.

"Salt is not salt for itself; it is seasoning for food. In the same way the disciples are there not for themselves but for the earth."¹ To be truly salty disciples requires us to involve ourselves with life on the earth as it is. We are the essential ingredient for making life on earth palatable. To lose our identity as Jesus-followers would be to make ourselves worthless witnesses for God and of no spiritual value to the world (v. 13).

As "the light of the world" (v. 14), faithful followers of Jesus were called to continue the mission of the Messiah. As "light"—not "lights"—Jesus commissioned His disciples collectively to pursue Israel's calling to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6; 9:6; 60:1, 3; Matthew 9:1-2; John 12:36; Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:5).

Jesus clarified His use of light imagery with two illustrative proverbs. The first refers to a city situated on a hilltop. Clearly visible from all directions, even at a distance, it "cannot be hidden" (v. 14). The second proverb illustrated the absurdity of lighting an oil

Did You Know?

Second-Temple Judaism, contemporary with Jesus, considered God's gift of the Law to Israel the most distinguishing expression of God's nature and character in this world. The Law was "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Jesus disagreed (5:13, 14). But He made clear in 5:17-48 that He had no quarrel with the Law. Thus, for example, far from weakening the Law's prohibitions against murder (5:21-26) and adultery (5:27-30), Jesus intensified and internalized their intended force. He forbade not only the acts of murder and adultery, but the sinful attitudes, actions, and words that led to them.

AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

lamp only to hide it (v. 15). Jesus insisted that, since His followers were "the light of the world," the reason for their existence was to shine and illuminate: "Allow your light to shine before all people."

In verse 16, He explains what He means. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, the mission of all Jesus' disciples in the world is simply to live out their new reality. "Good works" refer to the qualities that made them "blessed" (5:3-11). Their "good works" were not "the light," but only reflections of the light. "You" are the light, as you incarnate kingdom values. This is not for leaders only, but for the entire community.

Jesus' insistence that good deeds must be publicly conspicuous does not contradict His instructions in 6:1-18. Acts of private devotion to God—like almsgiving, prayer, and fasting—are not to be done publicly for the purpose of winning the admiration of others for the doers. All is to be done for the glory of God alone. Addressing His followers, commissioned to represent God in this world, here, for the first time in Matthew, Jesus called God "your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

Matthew 6:1-4

Jesus' Jewish contemporaries considered almsgiving (6:1-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18) the leading marks of authentic piety. Throughout this section of the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus took for granted that His disciples would take part in these traditional practices—"when you give" (vv. 2, 3), "when you pray" (vv. 5, 6, 7), and "when you fast" (vv. 16, 17). But, He sternly cautioned them that such private devotional practices were intended for an audience of one—God alone. This is the kind of "righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law" (5:20).

Jesus approved private devotional practices as "righteousness"—doing the right thing in relation to God and others. But He derided as "hypocrites" (vv. 2,

Think About It

“There is a veiled irony in the declaration ‘They have received their reward,’ and this adds to its impressive severity. They receive their pay then and there, and they receive it in full . . . : God owes them nothing. They were not giving, but buying. They wanted the praise of men, they paid for it, and they have got it. The transaction is ended and they can claim nothing more.”²

5, 16) those who did them merely “to be honored by others” (v. 2), “to be seen by others” (v. 5), or “to show others” (v. 16). He objected to supposed piety that was actually nothing more than ostentatious, pretentious, and self-aggrandizing public performances motivated by a desire to impress other people.

Giving alms—“doing acts of mercy”¹—is the most difficult of these three pious practices to do secretly. It inevitably involves at least two people—the giver and the recipient. Of course, the “wiring” of the human nervous-system does not actually allow the left hand to be unaware of what the right is doing (v. 3). Jesus’ ludicrous imagery was intended to urge His disciples to give as anonymously, discretely, and inconspicuously as possible. Avoid publicity and self-congratulation! Give out of pure love for God and the needy God loves!

When we give in this way, we are “perfect . . . as our heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). God’s gifts of sunshine and rain (5:45), like most of His gifts, come to us anonymously. As Christians, we have the advantage of knowing Who to thank.

Jesus encouraged His disciples to appreciate that God knew their true motives: “Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (v. 4; see vv. 6 and 18). Perhaps, God’s approval was the only heavenly reward they expected. If they gave with the right motives and intention, that would be enough.

1. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary on Matthew 1–7*, trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 206.

2. Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 91.

REFLECT

In what ways can you be salt and light in your world this week?

GEORGE LYONS

January

11

THE CLASH OF KINGDOMS

Every person must choose between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

THE WORD

MATTHEW
12:22–37

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

²⁴But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”

²⁵Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

²⁹“Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

KEY VERSE

³⁰**Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.** ³¹And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

³³“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵A good man brings good

things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

EXORCISM DIVIDED JESUS' AUDIENCE

Matthew 12:22-24

This is not the first account in Matthew in which “Jesus healed” a person with physical symptoms due to demon-possession (4:24; 8:28-34; 8:16; 9:32-34). In this incident, the healed man had been both blind and mute (12:22). His healing led the astonished crowd to wonder, “This couldn’t be the Son of David [that is, the Messiah], could it?”[†] (The form of their rhetorical question in Greek expects a negative answer.)

Unable to deny the power of Jesus, the Pharisees challenged its source, dismissing Jesus as “this fellow.” The increasing openness of the crowds to Jesus led the religious leaders once again to accuse Him of driving out demons “by the prince of demons” (9:34; 12:24). This time, they called the prince by name: “Beelzebul.”

The supposed Canaanite deity Baalzebul (“prince of Baal”), was mockingly maligned as “Baalzebub”—“lord of the flies”—in the Old Testament (2 Kings 1:2, 3, 6, 16). But by the New Testament era, he had been demoted to “Beelzebul, the prince of demons” (v. 24).

BEEZEBUL VS. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Matthew 12:25-29

Jesus challenged the absurd logic of the Pharisees’ accusation. If Beelzebul was a prince, he ruled the demonic kingdom of Satan, the archenemy of the kingdom of God. It would have been both nonsensical and self-defeating for the leader of the demons to empower Jesus to defeat demons. So He asked, “By what power do you guys do exorcisms?”[†] Weren’t they indirectly judging themselves as agents of Satan with their false charges (v. 27)?

Did You Know?

Jesus amazed the crowds with His authoritative teaching (7:28-29), showing He was Messiah in *word* in Matthew 5—7. In Matthew 8—9, His miracles confirmed He was also Messiah in *deed*. Controversies between Jesus and the religious authorities in chapters 10—12 led the Pharisees to plot “how they might kill Jesus” (12:14). To delay His arrest, Jesus relocated and attempted to limit the publicity complicating His mission (12:15-16). This fulfilled the prophecy of the Spirit-endowed Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42:1-4 (Matthew 12:17-21).

BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus insisted that He drove out demons “by the Spirit of God” (v 28). And if this was so, His exorcisms were evidence that God had taken the offensive. The undeniable power of God was engaging the forces of evil on their own turf. This signaled the nearness, if not the arrival, of the “the kingdom of God” (in Matthew only in 12:28; 19:24; and 21:43).

The “kingdom of God” (v. 28) wording is noteworthy, since Matthew elsewhere replaces this expression with “kingdom of heaven” (always “kingdom of God” in the other gospels). Whether already here or only very near, clearly Jesus’ exorcisms meant “the defeat of subordinate members of the kingdom of evil and, as such, preparation for the inevitable demise of Satan.”¹¹

Jesus compared His exorcisms to the tactics of a burglar binding a strong man in order to “plunder” his house (see Isaiah 49:24-25). By driving out demons—freeing them from bondage to Satan—Jesus continued His assault on the enemy’s kingdom, begun in His initial victory over the devil in the wilderness (4:1-11). This startling analogy resembles Jesus’ comparison of the unexpected coming of a thief in the night to His second coming (24:43; see 1 Thessalonians 5:2).

Matthew 12:30-32

Jesus called out the Pharisees’ claim that His exorcisms were empowered by Satan (v. 24) as beyond absurd. To consider Jesus’ power over demons of diabolical origin was to commit an unpardonable sin. Crediting Jesus’ ability to expel demons to Satan did not merely insult Him—“the Son of Man.” It blasphemed—that is, spoke derisively of—God’s Holy Spirit.

Jesus allowed that there was forgiveness for “every kind of sin and slander,” but such blasphemy could not be forgiven. Theirs was no inadvertent sin of ignorance. It was a calculated decision to reject God’s chosen Servant (Isaiah 42:1; Matthew 12:18) as an agent of Satan.

Think About It

The Pharisees had voiced their objections to Jesus' exorcisms aloud (12:24; see 9:3). So, what was the point of Matthew's note: "Jesus knew their thoughts" (12:25; see 9:4)? Did Matthew assume Jesus was clairvoyant? Or, since Jesus was already aware of the Pharisees' plot to kill Him (12:14), was Matthew's point that He knew well what actually motivated the Pharisees' accusations against Him in this situation?

GOOD VS. BAD

This offense was unpardonable, but not because it was so heinous and beyond the pale that divine pardon was unthinkable. It was not that the Holy Spirit had particularly "thin skin" and was easily aggrieved (see Ephesians 4:30). "There was no forgiveness for this precisely because in rejecting Jesus they had rejected the one divinely chosen means of salvation and had thus excluded themselves from the sphere of forgiveness"² (see Isaiah 63:7—64:12; Hebrews 2:2-3; 8:4-6; 12:16-17; 1 John 5:16-17). God cannot forgive those who refuse to be forgiven.

Matthew 12:33-37

Alleging to protect the vulnerable crowds from a would-be-Messiah they considered a charlatan, Israel's religious leaders rejected Jesus as satanic. They refused to see the evidence of God at work in His saving mission. They were not the holy protectors of the faith of Israel. The rotten "fruit" of their lives indicated that they were instead worthless fruit trees (v. 33). Their unproductive words suggested they were even a "brood of vipers" (v. 34; see 3:7)—like the clever snake in the Garden of Eden who misled Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3). Their words would condemn them.

1. George Lyons, "The Spirit in the Gospels," 33-87 in *The Spirit and the New Age*, eds. R. Larry Shelton and Alex R. G. Deasley, Wesleyan Theological Perspectives 5 (Anderson, IN: Warner Press 1986), 56.

2. Lyons, 58.

REFLECT **W**hat does it mean to align ourselves with the kingdom of God?

GEORGE LYONS

January
18

THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

*We must stay faithful to God as we live
among the unfaithful.*

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
13:24–30**

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹“No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ”

36–43

³⁶Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

KEY VERSES

³⁷**He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.**

⁴⁰“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send out his angels, and

they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴²They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

ENGAGE THE WORD

THE PARABLE

Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus didn't need to explain typical farming procedures to His agrarian audience. But readers today need such assistance. Before the winter rains began, in late September, farmers in Israel walked through their fields, sowing grain broadcast-style. They threw handfuls of wheat into the air, allowing the wind to distribute it as widely as possible (see 13:3-9). Next, they plowed their fields to cover the seeds with soil. Then, they waited half a year, letting rain and sun help the wheat germinate, sprout, and mature. Harvest began in April.

In Jesus' story, the farmer planted "good seed" (vv. 24, 27)—seeds set aside from last year's crop, sorted to remove weed seeds. Unbeknownst to the farmer, sometime later an enemy came by night ("while everyone was sleeping") and over-sowed weed seed. Nobody noticed this until "the wheat sprouted and formed heads" (v. 26). Early on, "tares" (KJV)—darnel or cheatgrass weed—resemble wheat. The poisonous fungus found on its mature seeds mixed with the wheat makes it inedible, "commercially useless [and] potentially harmful."¹

The farmer's servants alerted him to the huge number of troublesome weeds in his field and offered to eliminate them. A few random weeds might be expected and purely accidental. But such obvious sabotage had to be the work of "an enemy." In response, the farmer unexpectedly declined their offer and urged patience. He feared that entangled roots might cause them inadvertently to destroy some wheat while pulling the weeds (vv. 27-29).

Did You Know?

"Jesus concludes this interpretation with an exhortation He has already used in 11:15 and 13:9 to encourage spiritual and intellectual engagement with this teaching: *Whoever has ears, let them hear* (v 43b). These words are encouragement for the disciples to continue to be children of their heavenly Father despite their present circumstances, because they will be rewarded and evil will be judged (v 38a) [NBBC: *Matthew* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2019), 223].

THE INTERPRETATION

WHAT'S THE POINT?

The servants must have been mystified by their master's decision: "Let both grow together until the harvest." Then, the harvesters would collect the weeds first, tying them into "bundles to be burned" (v. 30). Afterward they would gather and store the ripened wheat in the farmer's granary. Nothing here resembled standard farming procedures.

Matthew 13:36-43

Jesus' day of public parables was interrupted by His explanation of "the parable of the weeds in the field" (v. 36). Jesus did this privately, at His disciples' request, in "the house" He'd left to teach the crowds (13:1-2, 36, 53).

This interpretation treats the parable as an allegory, identifying theological counterparts of many (but, by no means, all) aspects of the parable. We need not repeat these symbolic equations here (read vv. 37-41). Some equivalents and omissions raise difficult questions. Surely, we aren't to suppose that Jesus, like the farmer, was "sleeping" when Satan spread evil in this world (v. 27). Is the kingdom of the Son of Man (v. 41) to be distinguished from "the kingdom of [the] Father" (v. 43)—the kingdom of God (see Daniel 7:13-14; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28)?

We remain puzzled. Who do the "servants" (v. 27) represent? We might guess "the disciples," but Jesus' parable addressed the crowd. Would they have thought that? What's the symbolic force of their question (v. 27) and their offer to weed the field (v. 28)? To whom does the ripe "wheat" (v. 30) refer? What or who do the "bundles" and "barn" (v. 30) represent?

The existing equations within the interpretation have encouraged interpreters across two millennia to speculate wildly about the parable's unexplained features. Some guesses are more plausible than others. But most create as many difficulties as they try to solve.

Most interpreters consider the parable "a warning against premature separation [of believers and unbe-

Think About It

"A heavy infestation of darnel (indicated by it being 'sowed' among the grain) would cause the plants to be entangled. To sow darnel in a person's wheat field was punishable by Roman law. This real-life situation gave Jesus' hearers a picture of God's kingdom growing and thriving alongside evil in this world" [Life Application Bible Commentary: Matthew (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996), 267].

lievers] and an encouragement to be patient until the harvest. God will execute the separation in his time!"² This recognizes the importance of the story's central feature—waiting. The kingdom has already come. But final judgment awaits the end. What are Jesus' followers to do in the meantime?

Did the followers of John the Baptist expect the Messiah to destroy unbelievers to prepare for God's coming kingdom (compare 3:1-12 and 13:30)? In prison, John was apparently disappointed that Jesus befriended sinners rather than destroying them (11:2-19). Growing numbers of Jewish zealots were preparing to take up arms to free Israel from Roman occupation, as they attempted unsuccessfully from AD 67 to 73.

Was Jesus' parable intended to caution overly zealous Jews, mistakenly convinced that God's kingdom couldn't come while sin remained in Israel or evil prevailed in the world? How often have we failed to heed (v. 43) Jesus' warning about the risk of destroying wheat along with the weeds. Jesus accepted death on the cross rather than attempt to destroy evil before God's time.

The future vindication of "the righteous"—to "shine like the sun"—echoes the language of Daniel 12:3 (see Matthew 17:2). Only Jesus' followers, who remain faithful and obedient in this evil world, will share in the end-times glory of Jesus in the world to come (see Romans 2:7-10; 8:17-21; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:21; Colossians 3:4).

1. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 526.

2. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8—20: A Commentary on Matthew 8—20*, trans. James E. Crouch; Hermenia (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 254.

REFLECT

In what ways is God calling you to live faithful in an unfaithful world?

GEORGE LYONS

January

25

CREATING CARING COMMUNITIES

We must be careful that our lives do not cause others to stumble, but be willing to help those who do.

THE WORD

MATTHEW
18:1–17

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

²He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them.

KEY VERSES ³**And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.**

⁶“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

⁷Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! ⁸If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

¹⁰“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. ^[11]

¹²“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the

ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

ENGAGE THE WORD

CHILDREN WERE NOBODIES

Matthew 18:1-5

Matthew offers no clue as to what prompted the disciples' question, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (contrast Mark 9:33-37; see Matthew 5:19). However, cultural instincts provide a hint. Ancient Mediterranean cultures highly valued personal affirmation of one's worth and social status.

Jesus' answer began with a visual lesson: He invited a young child to stand among His disciples. His spoken reply began with *Amēn*—"Truly" (NIV). It's unusual, initial placement was a unique feature of Jesus' speech. "Amen"[†] affirmed that His teaching was true and dependable.

The prerequisite for entering the kingdom was to "be turned around"[†] and "become like little children"—who enjoyed no social status. Let God change your values. Abandon your pursuit of prestige and power. The church is no place for competition (see 20:26-28; 23:11-12). Humble yourself if you want to be "greatest."

Disciples should follow the example of Jesus, who actively pursued "downward mobility" (see Philippians 2:8). When we gladly welcome nobodies "in obedience to Jesus"[†] ("in my name"), we welcome Jesus into our church fellowship.

Matthew 18:6-9

The expression "causes . . . to stumble" is literally "scandalizes." Jesus warned against unChristlike attitudes, poor judgment, or reckless behavior that

CAUSING ANOTHER TO STUMBLE

Did You Know?

Jesus' instruction about approaching a brother or sister who has sinned is probably the one we bypass the quickest. Step one is a one-on-one conversation. Our initial response, all too often, is to speak to others either for garnering support for "our side" or to share as a "prayer request." It is in the safety and confidence of this one-on-one meeting where misunderstandings can be corrected, confession can take place, and/or restitution can be agreed upon.

PURSUING WANDERING SHEEP

contribute to another's moral ruin or spiritual downfall. "Things that cause people to stumble" refers to scandalous strategies intended to entrap people, tempt or entice them to sin or unbelief.

Jesus claimed it would be better to be drowned deliberately than to be guilty of causing another to perish. The word "woe" (v. 7) imitates the wails of mourners at Middle Eastern funerals. People fall into sin easily enough. Don't encourage them to sin by what you do or fail to do! Instead, sorrowfully lament the torment of those responsible for the undoing of others.

Jesus' shocking words in verses 8-9 were never intended to be taken literally. This is hyperbole—deliberate exaggeration used to emphasize a point. He wasn't recommending self-mutilation as a drastic preemptive measure to resist overpowering temptations. Jesus' point here was simply: Don't cause your own spiritual downfall! Deny yourself every momentary sinful pleasure now in the interests of a full and eternal life in the kingdom—present and future. His singular "you" warned every individual to do "whatever it takes" to avoid ending up "thrown into the fire of hell" (v. 9)—the cosmic incinerator of eternal regret.

Matthew 18:10-14

A similar story appears in Luke 15:4-7, alongside other parables about lost things. There, Jesus used it to challenge "the Pharisees and the teachers of the law," who objected to His friendship with sinners. He encouraged grumbling opponents to celebrate His recovery of lost people (Luke 15:1-2).

Here, Jesus addressed His disciples to encourage them to pursue and rescue unimportant, one-time believers who leave the community. Calling wandering believers "little ones" was a warm, familial way of referring to particularly vulnerable church members. Followers of Jesus should share God's concern to bring back to the community any and all who

Think About It

When Jesus said they were to “change and become like little children,” He put them on the low rung of society’s status ladder. He meant for them to give up status, to let go of competitive greatness. Another thing about children: they cannot take ownership of themselves. They are dependent on others for their lives, their care, and their future. In that sense, they are vulnerable. What a hard word for these disciples, arguing about who was greatest among them! They were to become like children, dependent totally on their Father.

“slip through the cracks.” Jesus seemed particularly concerned about recovering the scandalized—those who left the church because of the attitudes, words, actions, and failures of other church members.

Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus offered biblical guidance for dealing with the problem of community members apparently unaware of the sinful nature of their words or deeds. Perhaps, they failed to appreciate how damaging their sin was. Jesus urged the church to avoid scandalizing its most vulnerable members (see 18:6-9).

Still addressing followers individually (“you” singular), Jesus urged: If you observe another church member sin, following Leviticus 19:17, point out the “sin” to the fellow-believer in a private, one-on-one meeting. If they respond appropriately, problem solved!

However, if they remain unrepentant, following Deuteronomy 19:15, Jesus advised taking one or two other believers along for a less private meeting. Only if they remained unrepentant should the problem become public knowledge within “the church.” If the stubborn offender refused to listen to the communal voice calling for change, Jesus advised: “Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” Had anyone besides Jesus said this, we might assume He recommended excommunication—expulsion from the church. But how did Jesus treat such people? He loved and befriended them (8:5-13; 9:9-13; 11:19; 15:21-28). Of course, He advised them of their true standing before God. If they were not safely inside the kingdom they needed to repent and seek God’s forgiveness. Jesus always pursued restoration and reconciliation.

**DEALING WITH SIN
IN THE CHURCH**

REFLECT **H**ow might you help someone who is struggling in their faith?

February

1

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

Jesus calls the forgiven to also forgive.

THE WORD

MATTHEW
18:21–35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

KEY VERSES

²²Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

³⁰“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³²“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be

tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

PETER'S QUESTION ABOUT FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-22

In today's passage, Peter raised the question about how often someone should forgive another who has sinned or wronged him. That question was in response to Jesus outlining how believers should deal with sin and wrongdoing that might occur among them (see Matthew 18:15-20). The objective in addressing such issues is both redemptive and restorative, with the hope that a church member who has sinned will repent and that the estranged parties will be reconciled.

Given this context, Peter's question seems a bit irrelevant to what Jesus has taught, even though he likely thought that his suggestion of forgiving seven times to be extravagant in comparison to the expectations of Jewish law. Jesus' initial response counteracts Peter's suggestion by obliterating the limits that Peter initially placed on forgiveness. Although we often hear the topic of forgiveness left open-ended, Jesus also offered additional clarification about what this might mean.

A KING WHO FORGIVES THE UNFORGIVEABLE

Matthew 18:23-27

Jesus used a powerful story to clarify forgiveness as defined by the kingdom of heaven. The story is about a king settling business accounts with those who were tasked with those responsibilities, but one person stands out because he owed his master an enormous sum of money. The debt was so preposterous that it has caused interpreters to wonder who this man was, since no single individual could ever accumulate that much debt, even with excessive interest rates. What is clear is that the situation was utterly hopeless. The orders to sell his wife, children, and all his possessions—which would not cover a small fraction of the debt—merely highlight how desperate this man was. And

Did You Know?

The debt of 10,000 bags of gold (NIV) or talents (NRSVue) would have been beyond comprehension for Jesus' audience. Since a single "bag of gold" or "talent" was equivalent to 6000 denarii (a denarius was a Roman coin that approximated one day's wage for a laborer) or about 20 years of wages, the total debt would have totaled wages for a staggering 200,000 years! Since it would have been impossible for someone to accumulate so much debt, this could have been a person like a tax collector who borrowed or embezzled from the collections.

THE FORGIVEN WAS NOT FORGIVING?

THE ESSENCE OF FORGIVENESS

there was nothing he could do to make things right.

In that moment of desperation, the enslaved, helpless man fell before his master and promised for leniency, promising that he would make things right and pay back the entire debt. Although the expression "I will repay" was a common promise in ancient business documents and may have reflected the man's good intentions at that moment, everyone would recognize the impossibility of him living up to his promise. But because of his family, all he could do was humbly throw himself before his master and beg for mercy.

The king's response to his subject was amazing. He was moved with compassion (the same word used to depict Jesus' response to others; see Matthew 9:36; 14:14), released the man, and "forgave the debt" (18:27, NRSVue). There is no mention of additional conversation, but we would expect this dramatic event to affect the former debtor forever.

Matthew 18:28-31

The overreaction of the forgiven man to a colleague who owed him a miniscule amount of money in comparison is quite shocking. Since he had just been blessed by his master's mercy and grace, we would expect the man to consider his friend's personal request. It is likely that those who witnessed his punitive treatment of the debtor were distressed, not only by what happened to the man who was now confined to a debtors' prison, but also by what they saw in the life and attitudes of the one whom the king had forgiven. After all, when faced by similar circumstances, the forgiven man did not respond with the same mercy and grace with which he received. The man's refusal to extend forgiving grace to his colleague caused estrangement between them and more broadly among the community that witnessed his actions.

Matthew 18:32-35

The master's cancellation of the forgiveness that

Think About It

It is important to remember that forgiveness is a decision before it is a feeling. Too often we are tempted to wait until we feel like forgiving, or until we feel more like loving the person who needs our forgiveness. God would have us understand that forgiveness is a decision before it is a feeling.

he had granted earlier and punishment of the man underscores that forgiveness is more than a “get out of jail free” card. The master presumed that the same mercy he extended to the man would then be shared with his colleague ... or with others. That he responded with such harshness and no leniency, not to mention neither grace nor forgiveness, indicates that he had not taken to heart what the master had graciously done for him. The master’s anger toward the man is consistent with how God is depicted throughout Scripture: God’s anger is typically directed toward the people of God (not other nations) when they fail to live into the story of God and God’s grace.

The king’s actions did not negate his forgiveness but clarified the essence of forgiveness. What we find in Jesus’ parable is not a “forgive and forget” approach to the debts, sins, or wrongs that often face the community of believers. Forgiveness does not brush issues under the rug and pretend everything is fine. But it is as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). That is, we forgive those who have recognized and owned their sin, their wrongs, and their shortcomings—those who cannot make right on their own what has fallen short, but who turn and say, “In your mercy, will you forgive me?” This is the kind of forgiving grace from God that brings reconciliation and restoration to broken relationships and to the community of believers, so that turning the other cheek and going the extra mile confront injustice, rather than tolerate it.

REFLECT

Take time to think about God’s forgiveness and your forgiveness of others.

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February

8

PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

Jesus calls disciples to live out what they say they believe.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
23:23–39**

KEY VERSE

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

²⁵“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

²⁷“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

²⁹“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. ³⁰And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³²Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

³³“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? ³⁴Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵And so upon

you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Ber-ekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

³⁷“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁸Look, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

ENGAGE THE WORD

NEGLECT OF THE MORE IMPORTANT

Matthew 23:23-24

Jesus’ pronouncement of seven “woes” or curses against those Jewish leaders in Matthew 23 is reminiscent of Old Testament prophets who condemned the sin of Israel and her neighbors (see, e.g., Isaiah 45:9-10; Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 16:23). Whereas the first three woes address Pharisaic practices that restricted others from participating in God’s kingdom and grace (see Matthew 23:13-22), the fourth woe speaks about tithing, which the Jewish law emphasized as essential for support of the priesthood and Levites (Leviticus 27:30-32; Deuteronomy 12:17; 14:22). Jesus’ critique did not imply their elimination of tithing or faithfulness to seemingly minor aspects of the covenant with God. However, they often allowed the essence of their covenant or relationship with God—genuine love for God and neighbor—to go unnoticed.

Cleansing rituals were commonly associated with the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. In Luke’s version of these teachings, Pharisees criticized Jesus for not ritually washing His hands before a meal (see Luke 11:37-52). Their obsession for ritual purity drove them to strain the liquids they drank to ensure they avoided contamination by consuming even the tiniest unclean insect. But can you imagine their surprise when Jesus said that they ended up swallowing a whole camel? Both

Did You Know?

Nothing would make a person ritually unclean like contact with a corpse (see Numbers 19:11). Pharisees believed that a person (including one's shadow) could not touch a corpse or a grave. The practice of "whitewashing" inconspicuous tombs warned persons to avoid them and the potential impurity (see Luke 11:44, which refers to "unmarked graves"). Here in Matthew, this practice is described as also hiding flaws or problems (the more negative connotation of "whitewashing"; see also Ezekiel 13:10-12; 22:28).

REJECTION OF GOD'S PROPHETS

are unclean. Yet in their concern over the tiny insect, they missed something huge, perhaps without noticing. Amid such inconsistency, more important things often end up going unnoticed.

FOCUS ONLY ON APPEARANCE

Matthew 23:25-28

The concerns articulated within the Jewish law to distinguish between clean and unclean sought to enable God's people to relate to a holy God. Jesus suggests that such concerns had taken on a different perspective. Their concern for the outer cleanliness of cups and dishes wasn't the problem. Rather, such attention to the outside would seem misguided and even deceptive if the inside was contaminated or unclean, which Jesus compares to the Pharisees and others as "full of greed and self-indulgence" (v. 25). Jesus also notes the Jewish practice of marking graves so others could avoid accidental contamination by walking unaware on them (since these "dead places" were, after all, considered unclean). Jesus' comparison of the Pharisees and others to whitewashed, beautiful graves filled with "the bones of the dead and everything unclean" (v. 27) underscores their appearances of being holy in their actions but their inner character being "full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (v. 28). Jesus' concern was that one's whole life be characterized by authenticity and integrity, not by mere gestures toward piety.

Matthew 23:29-36

Jesus' final woe chastises a dark secret among the religious leaders. They sought to honor true prophets of the past whom their ancestors rejected and even killed (vv. 29-30) as a means of repentance. Their own actions acknowledged their ancestors' failures; yet, through these actions those leaders also identified themselves as descendants of those who had rejected God. Much like DNA passed down from generation to generation, their actions revealed a heritage of

Think About It

The “woe” sayings in Matthew 23 identify the teachers of the law and the Pharisees as “hypocrites.” Jesus’ use of this term, which originates in Greek theatre, is unique. The term literally refers to “judging under,” since actors wore large masks to portray characters on stage. The term “hypocrite” suggests readers must look beyond what they see on the surface to find the “real person.” The use of the term may describe persons who act with insincerity or, as in this chapter, inconsistency between their faith and actions, even if unaware of doing so.

rejection regarding God’s messengers. Jesus’ acknowledgment of what they would do to the “prophets and sages and teachers” that He would send to them (vv. 34-35) reiterates the legacy of rejection that the leaders sadly embodied. Although their lives appeared holy and their words were saturated with talk of God, they were unable to hear the prophetic message from God through God’s spokespersons.

LAMENT AND A PROMISE**Matthew 23:37-39**

Despite the tone of judgment in Jesus’ words, He does not stop there. For judgment does not have the final word, redemption does. Sin does not have the final word, grace does. Despair does not have the final word, hope does. Although Jesus laments over Jerusalem’s fate as the city that rejected those whom God sent to them and rebuffed God’s attempts to love and care for the people (note the image of a mother hen in verse 37), a glimmer of hope remains. Although the crowds in Jerusalem later rejected Jesus and shouted, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:22-23), the shouts of Jerusalem will shift to acclaim, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (v. 39; from Psalm 118:26), the same praise of the crowds when Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9). A day will come when Jerusalem welcomes and praises her Messiah!

Jesus’ teachings spoke to the realities of first-century believers and continue to speak to the 21st-century church. Never has there been greater ability for believers to cite the Bible regarding contemporary issues and agendas. Never has there been more venues to discuss and contemplate what it might mean to love God and love others in today’s world.

REFLECT

Take time to consider what it means to live a life of godly character.

February

15

THE GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

The Master calls us to be good stewards by faithfully investing our lives in the kingdom of God.

THE WORD

MATTHEW
25:14–30

“**A**gain, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

²¹“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²²“The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

²³**His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’**

²⁴“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew

KEY VERSE

that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸“So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

ENGAGE THE WORD

THE RECEPTION OF RESOURCES

Matthew 25:14-18

The story of a landowner leaving for an extended period of time and placing the operation of an estate or property in the care of trusted enslaved persons was common in first-century Palestine. This parable focuses on the master entrusting his significant wealth to three people. The allotment to each one was based solely on each person’s ability (Matthew 25:15).

This master’s trust and allotment of resources to the three are key aspects of the parable. The master did not burden any of these enslaved people either with the specific allotment or with any particular responsibility that came with it. The varied allotment amounts did not give one person more advantage than another; but, all three of these people received a significant responsibility. If anything, these allotments were surprising allusions to God’s grace and set up each person for success. But there is no indication that any of the three received specific instructions about what to do with his noteworthy responsibility. Nor is it likely that these people had the right to refuse their new assignment.

THE RESPONSE TO FAITHFULNESS

Matthew 25:19-23

Like the previous parable in Matthew 25, the arrival of the master came rather surprisingly. Although the focus of the story is on the master settling accounts with the three upon his return (the same task men-

Did You Know?

The English expression “bag of gold” translates the Greek word *talanton*, which may also be translated “talent.” Past readers often allegorized the distribution of “talents” (Matthew 25:15, KJV, NRSVue) as indicative of a divine distribution of gifts and abilities within the church. However, this is the second passage in Matthew’s gospel that appropriates the word “talent” as a monetary value (see Matthew 18:24).

tioned in the so-called “Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”; see Matthew 18:13), we as readers have already been given a summary of what each person did with the responsibility entrusted to him. The responses of the first two were identical. Each one explained what he received from the master and then noted the profit gained (see vv. 20, 22). Despite the master offering no explicit instructions about what they should do with the resources, the first two enslaved people may have imitated (however imperfectly) their master, trying to do what he himself had likely done with his own resources. That is, even though theirs was not a place of wealth, power, and influence within society like their master, they took what was entrusted to them and accomplished what they could.

Such work confirmed both their integrity and their faithfulness as people entrusted with both resources and an implied task at hand. It is no wonder that the master was quick to reward them with praise and greater responsibility. By putting them in charge of many things, the master recognized that their faithful response to what the master had placed in their hands proved their integrity and reliability for greater things. The master did not use adjectives like “good” and “faithful” glibly, for they took seriously the responsibility that came with what the master entrusted (or graced) them. And they did not let the allure of the resources detract them from the responsibility that came with such grace.

THE REOURSE FOR RESISTANCE

Matthew 25:24-30

The response of the third person did not mirror that of the first two. Rather than embracing the responsibility that came with what the master entrusted him, the third one took the funds and buried them in the ground to protect them from potential theft (Matthew 25:18). Although his actions differed from the first two, Jesus’ audience would not have initially questioned what he did, since persons in that era often

Think About It

The expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth” appears only seven times in the New Testament, mostly in Matthew’s gospel (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) and once in Luke’s gospel (13:28). In all cases, the expression appears in Jesus’ teachings. Although this has often been linked to hell and eternal torment, Jesus uses this graphic description to depict more specifically human response to divine judgment and separation from God by denoting extreme grief (wailing) and the tortured face of those enduring the unimaginable.

secured valuables in this manner. But the man’s later explanation exposed his true motives (vv. 24-25): his negative view of his master provoked him to act out of fear. That is, he merely hid what the master entrusted to him because of his perception of the master as unfair in his business dealings and treatment of others, and he feared harsh treatment if he failed to live up to his master’s unstated expectations. It is no wonder that the master responded strongly against the one in whom he entrusted much. Despite the trust extended to the man, his actions revealed that he knew little of his master. His banishment into the “outer darkness” (v. 30, NRSVue) may have been an appropriate description of his current lost state, since he only assumed to know his master and based his actions on false pretenses.

What the man voiced is not all that different from many people’s stated (or unstated) assumptions about God. When we see God predominantly in terms of judgment and correction, we end up responding to God out of fear, holding onto God’s blessings, and protecting grace as though there are limits to God’s abundant resources. But such responses can unwittingly reveal our lack of faith and understanding of God. Yet, God’s grace is also a call to take a risk, using what God entrusts to us to make a difference in the world around us.

REFLECT Consider the ways you are using the gifts, abilities, and resources God has given you.

RICHARD THOMPSON

February

22

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

*Jesus calls His disciples to show compassion
to those in need.*

THE WORD

MATTHEW
25:31–46

“**W**hen the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

KEY VERSE

⁴⁰“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or

thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

In the last teachings of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s gospel, Matthew presents Jesus not only as the king and ultimate judge over all humanity, but also as the one who discerns those who have embodied the kingdom that He has ushered in. And Jesus’ message is simply this: these “kingdom people” are those who embody the heart of the kingdom of heaven, not those who most loudly affirm themselves as God’s people.

SEPARATING THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

Matthew 25:31-33

This passage begins with several Christological images that appear elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel and confirm Jesus as the one depicted in this parable. That Jesus is “the Son of Man” (v. 31) reiterates that God is His father (see v. 34). The image of king in this passage alludes to the repeated references to Jesus as Messiah and Son of David throughout this gospel (see Matthew 1:1—2:2; 21:4-9). He is also the messianic shepherd who cares deeply for the sheep (see 2:6; 9:36; 18:12). Thus, Jesus is the one who uniquely “comes” (v. 31) and judges.

The image of a shepherd separating sheep from goats would have been familiar to Jesus’ audience. It was common for a flock to have a mixture of sheep and goats as they were released into the pasture during the day. However, at night these animals had different needs. Sheep could remain in the pasture at night but needed protection. However, goats could not handle cool nighttime temperatures and needed shelter. So the shepherd needed to separate the animals to care properly for them at night.

Did You Know?

Some Jewish traditions held that Satan was created for the pit (or hell), even though destruction was not part of God's original purposes (see 4 Ezra 8:59-60). Many Jewish traditions also maintained that demons were fallen angels (see 2 Peter 2:4).

AFFIRMING COMPASSION

Matthew 25:34-40

The separation of sheep and goats would seem like a simple process. And Jesus suggests that the distinction between those who embody and live into the kingdom of heaven and those who do not is also quite clear. What is surprising, however, is the criterion of judgment that Jesus identifies for the two groups. It isn't the confession of Jesus as the Christ. Nothing is mentioned about faith in Jesus. Jesus mentions nothing about salvation, forgiveness of sins, or someone's correct belief about a specific doctrine or issue. Rather, what Jesus does identify as essential is whether someone has responded with loving care and kindness for others in need.

Jesus' assertion is not surprising. After all, Jesus earlier declared the importance of two commandments as summarizing the entire Jewish covenant: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39). We can find repeated teachings that affirm the importance of visiting the sick, caring for those who are needy, and helping the stranger. Often, Israel was reminded how they found themselves in similar circumstances, and yet God cared for them (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 6). It was the story of God's love for God's people when they were "unlovable" that was to define and shape their continuing story. But Jesus even affirms their visitation of the imprisoned. Despite whatever violation of communal norms required the removal of such individuals from the community, there were those who did not forget such outcasts and extended God's grace to those who had estranged themselves and harmed the community.

What is most remarkable about this "group" is their seeming lack of awareness that what they were doing was truly worshiping and honoring God. Their response contrasts with others whom Jesus described

Think About It

“[The] overwhelming gift of the kingdom of heaven and eternal life (Matt 25:46) comes out of their response to the hardships of others (see Isa 58:7-8; Ezek 18:7, 16); the righteous have extended hospitality and acted kindly toward *the least of these brothers and sisters of mine* (Matt 25:40). This demonstrates profound solidarity between the king and his people [NBBC: *Matthew* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2019), 363].

**CONDEMNING
NEGLIGENCE AND
SILENT COMPLICITY**

earlier in Matthew's gospel as doing their religious practices for the sake of the notoriety they would gain (see Matthew 6:1-8). What is noteworthy of these at the shepherd's "right hand" is that they merely responded to others out of the life and values that they embodied. In contemporary terms, they took no selfies. They didn't draw attention to themselves. They simply extended God's grace into their corner of the world. They were (and are), to use Jesus' words, "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" people (see Matthew 5:13-14). And the Good Shepherd took note!

Matthew 25:41-46

In contrast to the first group, those who were at the shepherd's "left hand" (v. 41) were condemned for neglecting to care for needs of others. It should be noted that Jesus does not chastise such persons for not responding to *any* need. After all, such persons seemed to respond when they thought God was watching. But unlike the first group, the response of this group does not come from the heart. These people seem more inclined to care for others when they see such actions as what God expects of them. But Jesus' point seems more focused on people whose lives so embody the love of God that they respond to needs because they have embraced the values of the kingdom of heaven and see the world through God's eyes of mercy and grace.

Whether vocal or silent, negligence with regard to the needy opposes the heart of God. Because of God's grace, the church's story has been transformed to reflect the values and purposes of God's kingdom. The church's call is to live into God's story, which is characterized by God's grace and compassion. Such a story embraces the other, just as God embraces us.

REFLECT Consider ways you can become more aware of those in need around you.

The Quiet Folk

The people God selected for the Christmas narrative were quiet folk. No trumpet fanfare or prepaid announcement preceded their entrance. They were not outspoken people with outlandish egos. They were quiet . . . unassuming . . . simple people. Could it be that God chose such people as this so as not to detract from the quiet grandeur of the Christ child?

Do not think for a moment, however, that these quiet people were spiritual light-weights. Hardly! From their quiet lives we see demonstrated that which speaks louder than words.

MARY (LUKE 1:26-38)

Mary, the mother of Jesus, had every right to broadcast to the world the significance of her role. "Hey, everyone, look at me! An angel told me I'm to have a child who will be called the Son of God." But no. One of Mary's strengths was her genuine humility. She viewed herself as a bondservant of the Lord, and so she was. Quiet servanthood is the stuff out of which God's kingdom is made.

JOSEPH (MATTHEW 1:18-24)

His heart must have been torn in two at the thought of Mary's pregnancy. She was the woman of all women to him, soon to be his wife. Then, suddenly this pregnancy that defied logical explanation. Joseph could have covered his tracks and made a public example out of her, clearing himself of all responsibility. But no. Without malice, he did that which was both responsible and compassionate. He took her home, to a place of privacy and dignity. Responsibility tempered with compassion is the legacy this quiet man of God left to the world.

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH (LUKE 1:5-19)

An elderly priest and his wife were simply living out the golden years of their lives. Old and childless, they were unlikely candidates for a part in history's most touching story. Yet within both of these servants of God burned a quiet flame of hope. One day, God will deliver His people, they believed. He will send the promised one, the Messiah. Before sending the Messiah, a forerunner will appear, one who will prepare the people.

Although many years had come and gone since they first claimed these truths, this flame of hope had never flickered. The two continued to believe the promise of their God. Quietly, consistently they lived in expectation of God's deliverance. And God rewarded their faith. Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, bore a son in her old age, like Sarah of old. These quiet

people of faith became the parents of the forerunner, John the Baptist. The unwavering faith of an elderly couple became the vehicle God used to bring forgiveness and hope to a broken world.

SIMEON (LUKE 2:25-35)

Another quiet man of God. That's just about all we know about him. Some have speculated on his identity. Some say he was the father of Gamaliel (guh-MAY-lih-uhl), the famous Jewish leader in the first century. However, we must not worry about his credentials. The Scriptures tell us he was a devout man, righteous in character and conduct. Those seem to be credentials enough, at least to God.

Simeon was given the privilege of blessing and dedicating the baby Jesus in the temple. In fulfillment of the Mosaic requirement that every firstborn should be presented to the Lord, Joseph and Mary brought their child to the temple. How typical of God to select a quiet old man like Simeon to bless this baby. God seldom uses the seemingly most qualified to fulfill His purposes. God uses those who are quietly devoted to Him.

ANNA (LUKE 2:36-38)

And then there's the prophet Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. Elderly, she spent practically all of her time in the temple, praying and fasting. The fact that she was not allowed in the innermost chambers of the temple didn't dampen her faithfulness to God's house. Maybe it was providential that she would not have been allowed to go further than the Women's Court, because it was there that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus first entered the temple court. Although the level of Anna's commitment to God was likely never fully recognized by the established religious hierarchy, it was recognized by God.

And so this quiet woman was given the high honor of being one of the first to witness to others of the greatness of the Messiah.

THE SHEPHERDS (LUKE 2:8-20)

Then we have the shepherds. Quiet folk, each and every one. So quiet, they didn't seem to tell anyone at the manger scene their names. We simply know them as "the shepherds." Could it be, as someone has observed, that they were the only ones quiet enough to hear the angel's announcement?

There is an important message here for believers of today. We must take time out of the rush of pageants and parties to be quiet . . . and hear the gentle cry of the holy infant in the manger.

THE MAGI (MATTHEW 2:1-12)

Although we do not know how many, these "wise men" from the east were guided by

"his star" to find the "king of the Jews" (v. 2). Arriving in Jerusalem, they inquired about the birth and were pointed to Bethlehem (vv. 4-8). When they encountered the baby Jesus, in a quiet manner without fanfare or drawing attention to themselves, they offered gifts and worshiped Him. Although we do not know much about the magi, we do know they sought out and worshiped Jesus. These were truly wise men!

BUD REEDY

Jesus' Genealogy in Matthew

Matthew clearly structures his genealogy of Jesus to highlight the relationship with Abraham and David. This serves several purposes. First, Abraham was considered by Jews to be the father of their nation. David was their prototypical king. Emphasizing Abraham and David in the genealogy highlighted Jesus' deep Jewish roots. Second, Abraham and David were noteworthy as two persons with whom God initiated special promises. Those promises were repeated to the descendants of Abraham and David, but they received the ground-breaking promises.

The promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3, 15:5-16, and 17:4-22) committed God to making a great nation from Abraham and to giving that nation possession of the land of Canaan. Circumcision was the covenant sign of God's promise. The emphasis on Abraham in Jesus' genealogy spoke volumes regarding Jesus' role in fulfilling those promises to Israel. However, the promise to Abraham that he would become the father of many nations and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed also spoke of his significance to Gentiles. Matthew may have highlighted this role of Abraham to provide at the very beginning of his gospel a hint of the Great Commission that would come at the conclusion of his gospel. All the nations of the earth were to be discipled into the way of Jesus.

The promise to David (2 Samuel 7:4-16) repeated the promise of making a great name (v. 9) and of the land of Canaan (vv. 10-11). The new piece of the promise to David is that God would establish the throne of David's descendants forever. This became the basis for the Messianic hope during the Babylonian exile when the Davidic dynasty ended. Matthew's use of the title Christ (which can also be translated Messiah) with the name Jesus and the focus on Jesus' Davidic ancestry brings the identity of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah to the forefront of his gospel.

Another unique feature in Matthew's genealogy is the mention of four women: Tamar

(v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and “the wife of Uriah” (v. 6). The naming of women in a Jewish genealogy was highly unusual and Matthew’s purpose in naming these four is of great interest. Some mid-20th-century scholarship often noted a pattern of immoral behavior with these four women. Tamar seduced her father-in-law, Judah, (Genesis 38). Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 2:1). Ruth gained Boaz’s attention by getting into bed with him (Ruth 3:6-9).* The wife of Uriah was also called Bathsheba, the woman with whom David committed adultery (2 Samuel 11:2-5). They pointed out how this pattern of misbehavior contrasted with Mary’s virginal pregnancy by the Holy Spirit. Commentaries then pointed to the marvelous grace of a God who would accept such sinful women into the lineage of Christ.

Recently a shift has occurred in understanding the significance of the four women. Scholars realized that Matthew did not need to mention these women to show God’s grace. The men connected to them were already in the genealogy. If, for example, Tamar illustrated divine grace, then Judah should illustrate that grace even more. Today the most common explanation of the four women is that all were Gentiles. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth was a Moabite, and Uriah’s wife was presumably a Hittite as he was. The theme of God’s grace remains central, but God’s grace extends to all human beings as can be seen by the way God wove Gentile women into the genealogy of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus.

Through the genealogy Matthew is able to introduce Jesus as the long awaited Jewish Messiah and as the Savior of all humankind. Jesus is the one in whom the greatest promises of God in the Old Testament will come to fulfillment.

*Some interpret this passage in Ruth 3 as suggesting intimacy, while others see it only as a symbolic act of submission and the seeking of a marital relationship by Ruth.

ROGER L. HAHN

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 verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Winter 2025-26

Matthew 5:11-12

Matthew 18:3-5

Matthew 25:40

COMING NEXT QUARTER

SPRING 2026

Unit 1: Philippians

During this unit, we will explore the way Paul guides believers in applying the gospel in our everyday life.

Unit 2: Ephesians

We will discover the ways in which Christ's redemption enables us to fulfill the practical requirements of the gospel.

Unit 3: Jude

Although only 25 verses, we will look at the important message this short epistle has for us today.



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