

TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week One: The Coming of the Christ (Matthew 1:1-2:12)

As the era of the apostles started to come to a close, the Holy Spirit inspired the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry that we call the gospels. Matthew's account particularly emphasizes the ways that Jesus, the Christ, fulfilled the words spoken about him by inspired writers over the previous centuries. Our own study of Matthew can build and strengthen our faith in Jesus.

The Human Genealogy of the Christ (Matthew 1:1-17)

Matthew begins his account of Jesus' life and ministry with a detailed genealogy. While this makes for rather dry reading, it serves some important purposes. The apostle wants his readers to understand that Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human being, that his genealogy fulfilled prophecy, and that he was descended from the royal line of Judah and of King David.

Matthew traces a direct line from Abraham to Jesus (1:1-16). The table contains some familiar names, and many unfamiliar ones. Note that four mothers (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, identified only as Uriah's former wife) are included in the otherwise all-male genealogy. By including two foreign (non-Jewish) women and two women whose children came as a result of disreputable episodes*, the apostle brings out the typically human nature of Jesus' descent.

* For the account of how Tamar fits into the genealogy, see Genesis 38.

Matthew probably based his genealogy on records included in the Old Testament Scriptures, plus other more recent records for the generations after the end of the Old Testament. He made some adaptations to the genealogies, probably to fit the mnemonic structure that he gives them in 1:17 (see below). For example, verse 8 omits three generations of kings (Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah) between Jehoram (or Joram) and Uzziah (or Azariah)*.

* See 2 Kings 8:24-25, 11:1-3, 12:1-2, 12:19-21, 14:1-2, and 14:17-21, or parallel verses in 2 Chronicles.

This genealogy differs from the one in Luke 3:23-38. Modern commentators have come up with some contorted theories* about this, but there is a simple explanation, known to Christians many centuries ago. Jesus' human lineage includes a levirate marriage - the practice of marrying a dead relative's widow and having children that, by Jewish law but not by natural descent, were credited to the dead man. Joseph, Jesus' human father, was a child of just such a marriage**.

* One such theory is that Luke gives Mary's genealogy. Though often seen in modern commentaries, it is illogical and highly unlikely. It does not fit with Luke's wording or with any known background facts.

** Here are the details: Joseph's biological father was Jacob, but Joseph's mother was the widow of Jacob's half-brother Heli (or Eli). Jacob was Heli's nearest surviving relative, and accepted the responsibility of giving children to his widow. Thus "Jacob begat Joseph" (as Matthew says), but also "Joseph was the son of Heli" (as Luke says) according to Jewish law. The rest of the differences follow from tracing back separately from Jacob and Heli, who had the same mother but different fathers. Matthew used the biological line, since it showed that Jesus descended from the royal line of Israel, and so was an heir of the kingship. Either line would have suited Luke's purpose. A more detailed explanation is in Book I, chapter 7, of *Ecclesiastical History (History of the Church)* by Eusebius of Caesarea (early 4th century AD).

Matthew puts the lists into a structure that totals, with some double-counting on his part, three groups of 14 generations (1:17). This is simply an example of a common type of mnemonic

device (an aid to memory) that was often used. Matthew was hardly trying to trick his readers by streamlining the genealogy at certain points, since exhaustive data was not his main point.

We might also ask why Matthew chose to start his account with a genealogy. In contrast with the opening verses of Mark and Luke (see below), Matthew's opening verses seem uninteresting. Yet by doing this, Matthew accomplishes at least three things. To those familiar with Old Testament history and prophecy, he has shown that Jesus fulfills several prophecies about the lineage of the Christ. Since his genealogy goes through many generations of kings of Judah, he has also shown Jesus to be a royal Christ. And by tracing through generations of actual persons, lordly and lowly, admirable and infamous, he has shown Jesus to be a thoroughly human Christ.

Comparing the opening verses of the three so-called 'Synoptic Gospels' (Matthew 1:1-17, Mark 1:1-8, and Luke 1:1-4) also helps to clarify the nature of Matthew's audience and intentions. Matthew originally wrote for an eastern, primarily Jewish audience. While he, like all of the gospel writers, described many important aspects of Jesus' nature and ministry, he was especially concerned to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy and of all the plans God had made over the years of his relationship with Israel. Even more so than the other gospel writers, Matthew makes frequent mention of how something that God had said was fulfilled in Jesus.

Mark's gospel is much shorter, more action-based, with no introduction and far fewer parables. Mark was first distributed in Rome, and for a Roman audience his streamlined approach would have been particularly appropriate. Luke's gospel, written originally for a largely Greek audience, is similar in length and style to Matthew, but there are long stretches of material not found in the other gospels. Notice Luke's explanation of his purpose in the opening verses, an approach very similar to that a Greek historian or chronicler would have taken.

All three of these gospels were written shortly after AD 60, but they circulated independently for quite some time*. They, as well as John (written some 30 or so years later), were motivated by the need to have a substantial written account of Jesus' life and ministry, both to persuade doubters of the truth of his ministry of forgiveness, and to strengthen the faith of believers. Not long after John's gospel was written, the practice began of circulating all four as a collection, providing a thoroughly rounded portrait of Jesus the Christ.

* After Luke finished writing Acts (within a couple of years of finishing his gospel), the books we call Luke and Acts were together called The History of Christian Origins. Later, when it became common to group the four gospels together, Acts was split off into a separate book and given its present name.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What uses can you see for the genealogy in Matthew? How could we use it in study or ministry? Given Matthew's original audience and purpose, what might we hope to get out of studying the book? Why did God provide four different gospel accounts? How could this benefit Christians today?

The Birth of the Christ (Matthew 1:18-25)

To most Christians, the account of Jesus' birth is quite familiar. Yet there is still an entire dimension to these events that is hard for us fully to grasp or to appreciate. In human terms, what happened was 'impossible', and this was the first of many emphatic indications that the coming of the Christ had nothing to do with human activity, planning, or agendas.

Matthew briefly tells us how Jesus' human mother Mary came to be with child by the Holy Spirit (1:18-23). Unlike Luke, who focuses extensively on Mary's unusual experience, Matthew points

out the dilemma that Joseph, her intended husband, faced as a result of her miraculous pregnancy. Though in his mind there is now no possibility of marrying Mary, Joseph shows himself to be conscientious and compassionate with his plan to end things as quietly as possible.

Joseph is visited by an angel, who brings Joseph both explanation and reassurance, as he reveals God's plan to send a flesh-and-blood Savior. God, of course, wants Joseph to go ahead and wed Mary, and to bring up her child. The angel also gives Joseph the name that the child is to have: Jesus (Ιησους), from the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua*, meaning 'the Lord saves'. Further, Joseph is told explicitly that Jesus has come to save God's people from their sins.

* Likewise, the name Christ comes from the Greek word χριστος (christos), which is the translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, meaning 'anointed one'. Note that the Jews at the time of Jesus no longer spoke Hebrew. Most of the time they spoke Aramaic (an ancient language related to Hebrew) and/or Greek.

As with so many other events in Jesus' life, the miraculous birth fulfilled a prophecy, in this case a prophecy from Isaiah. The original prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 was given at a time of national crisis, and it was fulfilled in a limited way in Isaiah's own lifetime* as a sign to the king of Judah. In the birth of Jesus to Mary, it found its complete and perfect fulfillment**. Here too is the source of the name Immanuel, 'God with us'.

* For the full context and the short-term fulfillment of the original prophecy, see Isaiah 7. This is one of many examples in Isaiah of prophecies that were fulfilled in a limited way in Isaiah's lifetime, and in a more complete way in Jesus (or in other long-term plans that God had made).

The birth of Jesus thus took place just as planned (1:24-25). Matthew omits many details that we find in Luke, since he will focus (in chapter 2) more on the response of certain persons to the birth of the Christ. He does make a point of describing Joseph's faithful obedience. Though it may seem straightforward, it would have taken considerable faith and patience for Joseph to endure the gossip and criticism that must have come his way because of a situation that looked much different to outsiders. In this new family, though, each of the members understood that he or she was playing a role in the most important and miraculous of all God's plans.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways is the manner of Jesus' birth significant? Why did God choose to do it in a miraculous way? What qualities did Mary and Joseph each have to possess in order to play their role in the course of events? (See also the opening chapters in Luke.) How is Isaiah's prophecy important?

The Reaction to the Christ's Birth (Matthew 2:1-12)

Despite the humble nature of Jesus' human origins, there were persons - some even in prominent positions - who took note of his birth. This passage contrasts two opposite responses to the news. The brutal human ruler Herod 'The Great'* reacts with jealousy and fear, while three foreign Magi search eagerly for the new Christ, in order to worship him sincerely.

* As improbable as it may seem, this is how he is known to history. This is the first of four Herods, in the same royal line, who are mentioned in the New Testament. The Herod who is mentioned later in the gospels is Herod Antipas. The book of Acts refers to Herod Agrippa I (whom Luke again simply calls 'Herod') and Herod Agrippa II (whom Luke calls Agrippa).

The news from Bethlehem of Jesus' birth may at first have had little local impact, but it reached some persons much farther away (2:1-2). The Magi (eastern wise men) who came searching for him had been guided by a star that led them to Judea, where they asked for further directions, assuming that the birthplace would be well-known.

King Herod's reaction (2:3-8) reveals that this was the first time that he had heard of the birth of any new 'King of the Jews'. On hearing the report of the Magi, Herod frantically consults the religious leaders, who remembered Micah's prophecy that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. With treachery in his heart*, Herod deceitfully expresses his intention to worship the infant king, and asks the Magi to return when they know the location.

* Herod 'the Great' was a treacherous, cruel, and hateful ruler who committed many atrocities that are not recorded in the Bible. His gruesome orders in Matthew 2:16-18 were typical of his nature and his behavior.

The Magi go on to worship the infant Christ sincerely (2:9-12), again following the star that God had provided*. Their generous gifts and humble reverence contrast sharply with Herod's selfish fear and devious scheming. Here, perhaps for the first time, we see the kinds of opposite reactions to Jesus that have typified human beings ever since his birth. Some humbly worship him, while others frantically try to crush out the truth that he brought into the world.

* Various commentators have attempted to prove that the star was a comet, a meteor, or some other specific object. The only definite fact about it is also the only important point: namely, that God provided the star.

The Magi are also warned against Herod, foiling his plan to get his cruel hands at once on this potential rival king. Again, for the first of many times God did whatever was needed to keep his Anointed One safe until he had fulfilled all that he was sent to do.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why would God have called for distant persons such as the Magi to come in search of Jesus? What might they have believed about the child they went to see? Why did Herod react with fear to the same news? In what ways do others respond to Jesus in ways similar to Herod? What can we learn from the reaction of the Magi to the whole situation?

Partial Bibliography

If you plan to study on your own, and would like suggestions on commentaries or references to use, just let me know. Here is a partial listing of some useful commentaries on Matthew:

H. Leo Boles, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Gospel Advocate Commentaries
R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Frank Gaebelin (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*
J.W. McGarvey, *A Commentary On Matthew & Mark*, The Restoration Library (Gospel Light)
J.W. McGarvey & Philip Pendleton, *The Fourfold Gospel*, Cogdill Foundation Publications
John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary
Manlio Simonetti (editor), *Matthew 1-13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
Manlio Simonetti (editor), *Matthew 14-28*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Two: The Preparation of the Christ (Matthew 2:13-3:17)

After the birth of Jesus, God guided him and his family through some perilous events. Years later, when Jesus had grown to adulthood, it was time to begin his ministry. As God had promised, John the Baptist preceded the Christ and prepared the way for him. John's ministry, which centered on repentance and baptism, reached its climax in the baptism of Jesus himself.

Review of Last Week's Class

Matthew opens with the human genealogy of the Christ (1:1-17), tracing Jesus' lineage through the famous and infamous, the known and the unknown, with several of the mothers included in the list. The genealogy demonstrates the fulfillment of a number of prophecies, and it also establishes Jesus' royal descent. The wide range of persons in his direct line also shows him to be from a fully human family.

Though we are all thoroughly familiar with the story of the birth of the Christ (1:18-25), it is still well worth thinking about. It involved no less than a woman being found with child by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. Matthew also acquaints us with the names Jesus (the Lord saves), Christ (Anointed One, or Messiah), and Immanuel (God with us). Joseph, Mary, and Jesus formed a unique and special family.

The reaction to the Christ's birth, as recorded by the apostle (2:1-12), is illustrative of the kinds of reactions that Jesus arouses in any age. While the wise Magi came from far away to search for Jesus, King Herod reacted in fear, and formed a treacherous plot. Even so, today we see humble seekers who are ready to do whatever is needed in order to learn the truth of the gospel, and we also see Herods who will do anything to suppress God's truth.

Surviving Some Perilous Times (Matthew 2:13-23)

When King Herod's first plot against the new 'king of the Jews' was thwarted, he devised a new and more brutal approach that brought sorrow and harm to many innocent families. Even after Herod's death, Jesus' family had to be on guard against plots from Herod's son. God guided them through all of the dangers, and in so doing also fulfilled more prophecies about the Messiah.

This time, Herod comes up with an even more deadly and inhuman plot to eradicate the threat that he perceived Jesus to be (2:13-18). God continues to guide the family, and he warns Joseph just in time for the family to flee to Egypt before Herod's orders (see below) take effect. Matthew points out the thematic similarity with ancient Israel, when they went down to Egypt* and much later returned to the Promised Land.

* Note that, when Matthew quotes from Hosea 11:1, he is not necessarily claiming that the original passage was a prophecy about Jesus. Instead, he wants to make sure that we notice the spiritual parallel involved. In particular, Jesus was God's firstborn Son in a more complete way than Israel ever was. It is in this sense that Matthew says the Scripture was 'fulfilled'.

Herod's bloody orders to slaughter the young children of Bethlehem is infamous, and yet it was only in keeping with his cruel nature. During Herod's reign, he was notorious* for the innocent blood he shed, while somehow managing to stay in favor with his Roman overlords**. We can only imagine the depth of 'weeping and great mourning' that his senseless, barbarous actions caused. Yet, in a way, he is again a typical example of the world's response to Jesus. While few persons have ever caused as much physical harm as Herod did, many persons engage in senseless and useless attempts to deny God's truths, hurting themselves and others in the process.

* In secular history, Herod's final commands, issued when he was informed of his terminal illness, are even more infamous. After inducing each town in his domain to send representatives from among their leading citizens, Herod locked them all up and ordered that they all be executed immediately upon his death. Aware that he was immensely unpopular with his subjects, he hoped in this way to make certain that his death was a cause for mourning, not celebration. (His orders were disobeyed at the last moment.)

** The Romans preferred to allow local and regional rulers to retain authority for day-to-day government in the territories the Romans had annexed to their empire. They would usually allow them to remain in power as long as they remained loyal to Rome. The shifty Herod proved to be an expert at remaining in favor.

In its original context, the Jeremiah verse that Matthew quotes comes from a passage in which the prophet encourages his listeners with the hope that they will be restored after a time of captivity and exile. Yet even while looking in hope to the future, he mourns for the many Israelites who had to fall when God disciplined the unfaithful nation. So too, even as God ensured Jesus' safety, he mourned for the families who suffered from Herod's horrid scheme.

After the danger had passed, the family found a home in Nazareth (2:19-23). They first returned to Judea upon hearing the news of Herod's death*, but then found that Herod's son Archelaus now reigned there**, so that there was still a potential danger. God again warned Joseph, trusting in Jesus' human father to take care of Jesus. The family thus settled for good in the Galilean town of Nazareth, where they had lived before the birth of Jesus (see Luke 1:26, 2:4).

* Herod 'The Great' died in 4 BC. When the medieval chronicler Dionysus Exiguus designed our current BC/AD calendar, he intended for Jesus' birth to be in the year AD 1. But he made some calculation errors that were not discovered until well after his calendar was in common usage, resulting in Jesus being born "BC". In fact, Jesus could have been born as early as 6 BC, if Herod's order to kill male infants two years old or less was based on that amount of time having elapsed since he had seen the Magi. More likely, though, Jesus was born not long before Herod's death.

** When Herod died, his kingdom was divided amongst his sons. One of them, Herod Antipas, will play a role later in the gospel account.

Matthew points out that even the town where Jesus lived was a fulfillment of prophecy, for 'He will be called a Nazarene'. This time the apostle is not making a direct quotation of Scripture, but rather is applying two passages in Isaiah. Since the name Nazareth comes from the Hebrew word for branch (or sometimes sprout, or shoot), Matthew understands Isaiah 4:2 and Isaiah 11:1 as being fulfilled, in a figurative sense, in Jesus' family residing in Nazareth.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does Herod illustrate some of the ways that the worldly might respond to Jesus? Why did God allow Herod to harm so many innocent persons? What is the importance of Jesus' family going to Egypt? Why does Matthew claim that Scriptures like Hosea 11:1, Isaiah 4:2 and Isaiah 11:1 are 'fulfilled' in Jesus?

The Ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12)

Before the beginning of Jesus' own ministry. God sent John ahead of him to prepare the way. This also fulfilled some well-known prophecies, besides making things ready for Jesus in a number of practical respects. Both John and his ministry were straightforward, presenting a stark but necessary message about the need to repent and to call out to God for the forgiveness of sins.

To those who heard him, the nature of John's ministry combined the familiar and the unfamiliar (3:1-6). His message unmistakably centered on a call to repentance, characterized by his call to 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'. As Matthew indicates, Isaiah 40:3 foretold a forerunner* to the Christ, just as John was preparing the way for Jesus. John's appearance and lifestyle were unusual and striking**, and no doubt this created some interest. But in any case, he created a sensation, with large crowds coming out to hear what he had to say, and in many cases to be baptized.

* John was also the Elijah-like figure foretold in Malachi 4:5.

The apostle also records a particular incident in which John confronts the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees (3:7-12). Both of these groups had lost their focus on God himself, wandering off to pursue righteousness by works (the Pharisees) or worldly benefits (the Sadducees). John's denunciation of their pretensions and false hopes is blistering, both in its language and in its implications.

Strongly worded too is his announcement about his successor, the Christ. John knows that Jesus will be much greater and much more powerful. He also knows that his own ministry is only to set the stage, while Jesus' ministry will provide a winnowing or judgment, as the people respond to him one way or another. Jesus' ministry will bring baptism (immersion) by the Holy Spirit and by fire*, at once a graver and a more stirring baptism than that of John.

* Many commentators have their own theories about what John meant by this, and a careful study of this topic goes well beyond a class on Matthew. Most commentaries on Matthew will provide the author's suggestions about this phrase. It is probably more important for us to consider the effect such a statement would have made on the crowds, who had even less of an awareness of what it might mean. What would have come across unmistakably was the imagery and the critical nature of what John was implying.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What did John's ministry accomplish? How did his message of repentance relate to the ministry Jesus would have? What should we learn from the confrontation between John and the Pharisees and Sadducees? How might John's listeners have interpreted his statement about being baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire? What role does John play in building our faith in Jesus?

Jesus Is Baptized By John (Matthew 3:13-17)

When the time was right, Jesus came to see John, along with the crowds that followed the Baptizer. Realizing who Jesus was, John was at first understandably reluctant to baptize him. Once Jesus had reassured him and the baptism was completed, God provided some unmistakable signs that Jesus was his own Son. The Christ was now ready to start his public ministry.

The meeting between John and Jesus is described in the briefest of terms, yet it is quite a significant moment (3:13-15). It represents the climax of John's ministry, and the opening of Jesus' public ministry. John's visibility and success would thereafter be transferred to Jesus. The new ritual of baptism* and its symbolism would also become incorporated into Jesus' ministry.

* Although sometimes a commentator will state that John's baptism was based on Jewish proselyte baptism, this assumption is an anachronistic error. Proselyte baptism did not arise until after the time of John and Jesus, and it also differed from John's in many particulars. Other ancient religions (including Judaism) did have water-related rituals, but none of them resembled John's baptism to any significant degree.

When he realized that Jesus wanted to be baptized, John was at first hesitant, for he knew that Jesus was sinless, and had no need to repent or to be forgiven of any sin. But Jesus assures John that it is indeed appropriate for John to baptize him, 'to fulfill all righteousness'. Matthew does not explain for us what Jesus meant, but there at least two relatively obvious reasons for it. By submitting to baptism, Jesus made himself like one of us in yet one more of the many ways that he did so. Then also, his baptism provided the occasion for the Spirit to come upon him visibly.

For, after the baptism (3:16-17), some extraordinary events happen. Heaven is opened, and from heaven the Spirit descends in the likeness of a dove, coming to rest on Jesus. At the same time, a voice from heaven proclaims Jesus to be God's Son, perfectly pleasing to him. Thus was Jesus emphatically presented to the world, ready to carry out the ministry his Father had given him.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What reasons might there be for Jesus to be baptized by John? Did Jesus expect John or John's followers to understand? Why did God choose this moment to open heaven and send the Spirit visibly? What significance does this have for us now?

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Three: The Early Days of Jesus' Ministry (Matthew 4)

After John baptized Jesus, the Savior was almost ready to begin his earthly ministry. Jesus first went alone into the wilderness for a period of testing, and then he started proclaiming his message. He began to assemble a group of devoted disciples, and as he taught and preached, he also performed miraculous healings and other demonstrations of divine power

Review of Previous Classes

Matthew begins with the coming of the Christ (1:1-2:12). The apostle gives Jesus' human genealogy, describes his birth, and then shows the contrasting reactions of Herod and the Magi to the birth of 'the king of the Jews'.

The gospel account then looks at the preparation of the Christ (2:13-3:17). As an infant, he had to survive some perilous times, especially the deadly plots of King Herod. Guided and cautioned by God, Jesus' faithful human parents kept him safe, eventually making their home in Nazareth. When the time was near for Jesus to begin his ministry, John the Baptist prepared the way for him, baptizing and proclaiming a message of repentance. John also confronted the existing religious leaders, whose perspectives were contrary to the plans and will of God.

Then Jesus himself was baptized by John. Although Jesus had no sin to repent of or to be forgiven, as the 'Son of Man' he submitted to baptism in order "to fulfill all righteousness". After his baptism, the Spirit settled on him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed him to be God's Son.

Temptation in the Wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11)

After Jesus was baptized and revealed to the populace, the Spirit led him out to a deserted area, where he faced a time of testing and temptation. This period reached a climax in a face-to-face confrontation with Satan himself. The temptations offered by the master tempter help us to see how differently Jesus could have lived if he had not been so committed to his Father's will.

Even before the appearance of the devil, Jesus had to endure forty days without food (4:1). This was not an act of his own will, in order to prove his worthiness, but rather was done at the direction of the Spirit. The Spirit led him into a deserted area* where he would have no distractions of any kind. He would have to put his trust completely in God, in order to avoid being overwhelmed by his physical needs. Although Jesus was perfectly sinless in every way, we can never remind ourselves too often that he had the same human nature, with all its needs, that we also have. To allow his physical desires to go unfulfilled called for tremendous faith.

* The description literally refers to a 'deserted place', not a 'desert' in the sense that we usually conceive of it. That is, it was not a place with blazing sand and cacti, but simply a remote area with few signs of life.

Satan's tests may seem crude to us, because of the way that Jesus so effortlessly parried them (4:2-11), but few of us indeed could have resisted them if we had been in his place. These three temptations strike at the most basic kinds of doubts that the devil* likes to arouse in any human

being, and the temptations we face are only slightly more disguised. In decisively refusing even to consider giving in, Jesus shows us that resistance to temptation comes from a strong foundation of faith, which allows us immediately to see sin and selfishness in their proper light.

* Notice that both 'Satan' and 'the devil' are used interchangeably in this passage. As with Jesus Christ's own names, these are two different and appropriate names for the same being. The name 'devil' means 'slanderer', and the name Satan means 'adversary'.

Naturally enough, the tempter's first effort makes use of the enormous hunger that Jesus must have felt. To turn stones to bread would have been a trivial act for someone who could heal the sick and raise the dead, so there is no doubt that Satan was merely presenting Jesus with an option that he already had. Jesus' answer, which quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, is not a mere rhetorical trick. Jesus truly lived on his Father's Word and his Father's will, since he constantly nourished himself through prayer and time spent with his Father. While we generally give urgent priority to physical needs or desires, Jesus gave first priority to his spiritual needs and desires. As a result, he was willing to wait as long as his Father wished before he ate again.

The next temptation may at first seem silly, and yet it is only a slight exaggeration of some common temptations that we face. To throw oneself down from a tall place, simply to see if God will save us, seems absurd. Yet are we not doing essentially the same thing whenever we convince ourselves that a taste of some sin or dubious pleasure won't hurt, since surely God loves us and will protect us from any real harm? Jesus alone knew with certainty that we should not repay God for his compassionate protection by taking it for granted.

The third temptation* comes back to something Jesus actually could have done for himself. Although the devil promises to give Jesus all the kingdoms and riches of the world, in reality Jesus could simply have taken them for himself, if he had so desired. Had he ever decided to stray from God's plans for him, his life would have offered unlimited opportunities for enjoyment, power, wealth, and success. But Jesus knew that to pursue these things, whether or not he literally bowed down to Satan to get them, would have been blasphemous. He had come to serve God, not Satan, and not even himself. His resolve shows us once more that, with faith, it is possible to resist even the strongest temptations.

* Note that, although Satan ceased visibly to appear in front of Jesus after this third attempt, these were hardly the last temptations that Jesus faced. He was "tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Practically every moment of his life presented temptation in some form.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why did this period of testing come immediately after Jesus' baptism? What might the purpose of it have been? Why did God allow Satan to tempt Jesus so directly? What can we learn from Jesus' response to temptation (either in general or from specific temptations)? How can these events build our faith in Jesus?

His Public Ministry Begins (Matthew 4:12-17)

John's task was now complete, and it was time for Jesus to take center stage. He began his work of preaching and teaching in Galilee, not far from his home in Nazareth. In this humble territory, he began to reveal the light that he had brought into the world. At the same time, he called unequivocally for his hearers to repent, and to ready themselves for a new kind of kingdom.

The glorious ministry of God's own Son began in the humble territory of Galilee (4:12-16). The faithful John, having prepared the way, was imprisoned by Herod Antipas* as Jesus was beginning his work. The early days of his ministry were spent in Galilee, which was in the north of the ancient kingdom of Israel, near the Sea of Galilee*. Jesus moved out of his inland hometown of Nazareth and began living in Capernaum, a more prominent town on the north shore of the lake. Capernaum was a practical location from which to travel around Galilee.

* Herod Antipas was one of the sons of Herod 'The Great'. We shall meet Herod Antipas in Matthew 14.

The early ministry of Jesus fulfilled a prophecy (quoted here by Matthew) from Isaiah 9:15-16. Isaiah foresaw the location of Jesus' ministry, and described it in memorable terms. Galilee in the time of Jesus was a backwater, populated by a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, considered by most Jews to be on the outer fringes of spiritual and economic affairs. Yet it was here that the greatest light of all first shined, and many centuries later we still associate Jesus with the region.

From the very beginning, Jesus' message went to the heart of the needs of humanity (4:17). Whatever else he would do for us, whatever he would give us or reveal to us, he knew above all our need for the forgiveness of our sins. He thus preached exactly what John had emphasized, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near".

Repentance is a prerequisite for divine forgiveness. In itself, repentance merely means to acknowledge and admit the wrongness of our sin, without making excuses, giving qualifications, or asking for exceptions to be made. We do not necessarily need to perform any physical actions to repent, and yet genuine repentance is often much harder for us than physical accomplishments might be. It is because true repentance is so difficult for us that it is so precious to God.

The other half of Jesus' message emphasized the nearness of God's kingdom*. This is best understood in the broader sense of God's reign, God's expression of sovereignty. It includes what we know as the church, but it is hardly limited to a human organization of any kind. God's kingdom has always been near for those who seek it. Jesus was bringing a new and perfect manifestation of this kingdom, freely available to all who desired it and valued it. The realness of the kingdom is the incentive he offers for us to repent of our sins and worldly ways.

* Some commentators try to discern a pattern regarding the variation in the gospels between 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of God'. But for all practical purposes, the phrases mean essentially the same thing.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is the significance of Jesus beginning his ministry in Galilee? What does Isaiah's prophecy teach us? What does it mean to 'repent'? Why did Jesus emphasize this at the start of his ministry? What did Jesus have in mind when he referred to the kingdom of heaven? How might his listeners have understood it? What did he mean by 'near'?

Calling & Healing (Matthew 4:18-25)

From the beginning, Jesus carried out both a public ministry to the crowds and also a private ministry with devoted followers. Here, we see Jesus begin to call to him those who would become his closest disciples, and then we see the kinds of things that he did among the crowds. Throughout the gospel accounts, we are reminded of the importance of both of these ministries.

Matthew first describes for us the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John (4:18-22). These two pairs of brothers would remain devoted to Jesus for the entire duration of his ministry, and beyond. All of them were fishermen, and they were in the act of plying their trade when the time came for them to follow Jesus once for all, in order to become what Jesus called, 'fishers of men'. Despite their humble backgrounds and the rough edges in their characters, Jesus knew the faith that was in their hearts.

Indeed, as soon as Jesus tells Peter and Andrew to come with him, they leave their nets behind* and commit themselves to his ministry. Jesus obviously did not object to entrusting the apostolic ministry to the humble and lowly of the world, but neither did he choose his disciples for that reason alone. There were a great many fishermen like Peter and Andrew that he could have chosen, but he sought those few who would have this eager, unqualified readiness to follow him.

* Note that their immediate decision was not mere impulse, nor was it merely that they 'saw something' in Jesus that made them obey him despite having little knowledge of him. The lengthy encounter described in John 1:35-42 occurred before this, and thus the two brothers had become well acquainted with Jesus.

They are soon joined by the James and John*, the sons of the fisherman Zebedee. They too follow without delay, bidding farewell to their father, their boat, and their livelihood.

* It is generally assumed that John is the other disciple (besides Andrew) who is mentioned in John 1:35.

With these devoted followers joining him, Jesus gave his time to teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23-25). For a good while he remained in the territory of Galilee, visiting the many towns and synagogues there. He also began to perform miracles, though always for a compassionate purpose, never for entertainment and never for personal gain. It is easy to see why such large crowds began to follow him.

Yet we know that most of the persons in these crowds were not there for the reasons that God wished them to be. Throughout the gospel, we shall see Jesus' extraordinary patience and persistence as he teaches the crowds one important spiritual lesson after another, even though few of them understood. Meanwhile, he carefully teaches the devoted few like Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee. They too had plenty of flaws and misunderstandings, but they were prepared to stay with him regardless of the results or consequences.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why might Jesus have specifically sought out Andrew, Peter, James, and John? What was he calling them to do? What might we (or others) have done in the same situation? What are the main components of Jesus' ministry so far? How can we apply the same things? What was the purpose of the miracles in this period of Jesus' ministry?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2007

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes for Week Four: A New Perspective - Part One (Matthew 5:1-6:4)

Popularly called 'The Sermon On the Mount', the lengthy discourse in Matthew 5-7 is a detailed presentation of a new perspective that Jesus brought to God's people. Almost every sentence gives us something to think about, and Jesus' lesson presents many ideas worthy of further study. Our class time will be devoted first of all to an understanding of the overall lessons we find here.

Review of Previous Classes

After describing the coming of the Christ (Matthew 1:1-2:12) and the preparation of the Christ (Matthew 2:13-3:17), Matthew moves on to a description of the early days of Jesus' ministry (Matthew 4). Many of the key features of his ministry can be seen from its very beginning.

After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit led him into the wilderness for a time of temptation. Because Jesus had a fully human nature, he was truly tested, first by hunger and then by a series of temptations by Satan. Afterwards, Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee, fulfilling another of Isaiah's prophecies. As did John, he preached repentance and the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry was both public and private, as he selected a small number of especially faithful followers and also ministered to the crowds through teaching and healing.

True Blessedness (Matthew 5:1-16)

As he opens what might be his most famous lesson, Jesus makes a series of observations about the nature of true blessedness. Each of the 'Beatitudes' constitutes a direct refutation of the world's logic and of its conventional wisdom. As a whole, they provide a striking call for us to reconsider our entire mindset, so that we can begin to see things from God's viewpoint.

As familiar as these teachings on the mountainside are, it is worth bearing in mind their original setting (5:1-2). Matthew describes it as something of an impromptu discourse, and it is likely that Jesus also repeated many or most of these teachings in other lessons. Note that this setting makes it unlikely that the listeners would have been able to focus on one or two points in detail.

Instead, the unexpected or paradoxical nature of point after point in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 would have left a memorable overall impression, which was important in its own right, over and above the value of any of the specific teachings. Since almost every verse in these three chapters has been the subject of extensive preaching, teaching, and writing, we shall try instead to perceive the overall perspectives and impressions that Jesus wanted to leave with his listeners. This then can also serve as a worthwhile starting point for further, more detailed study.

The 'Beatitudes'* illustrate all of these ideas (5:3-12). Though thoroughly familiar to most Christians, in their original context they would have been surprising or even confusing, for they are the reverse of worldly logic and reasoning. Jesus describes true blessedness** in terms of qualities that are generally considered to be negative, unpleasant, and undesirable.

* This familiar term comes from the Latin word 'beatus', which means 'blessed'.

** The Greek plural adjective μακάριοι ('makarioi') is usually translated 'blessed', which is only a rough equivalent. It is a somewhat poetic or formal word that most literally means 'counted as fortunate' or

'counted as happy'. But it does not mean 'happy' in the way that we usually use the English word. That is, it is an error to equate the condition described in the Beatitudes with a mere positive emotional state. The Greek word corresponding most closely to our word 'happiness' is εὐδαιμονία ('eudaimonia'). It is used extensively, for example, in the works of Aristotle, but none of its forms appear in the New Testament.

It is also important to note that Jesus is not referring to numerous distinct groups of persons here*. That is, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek will usually refer to the same kinds of persons, those who patiently accept life's sorrows and injustices without taking out their pain on others. Ideally, of course, Jesus is calling everyone to develop all of these qualities.

* Thus it is not particularly important to analyze why a particular blessing is associated with a particular quality. Many of the blessings are quite close in meaning to one another, and this is intentional. While it can be interesting to, for example, speculate on why the meek will inherit the earth whereas those who mourn will merely be comforted, this kind of analysis misses the main points of the passage.

Seekers of righteousness, the merciful, and the pure in heart represent those who strive to adopt a Christ-like perspective on their lives in this world, keeping free from sin and selfishness. While such qualities are often praised, they are only rarely pursued, because they seem likely to lead to a life of dreary self-sacrifice and self-denial. Yet the things that believers might have to do without in this world are trivial when compared with the eternal blessings that God offers us.

Those who act as peacemakers, or who are persecuted, have taken an active step in making themselves vulnerable to harm or disappointment, for the sake of doing what they know to be right. They too will find spiritual blessings that far outweigh any worldly comforts and praises they have given up.

When Jesus calls us, then, to let our light shine (5:13-16), he has these qualities in mind. His image of the faithful as 'the salt of the earth' refers to salt's properties as a preservative, a protector against decay and rot. But, just as salt has only its 'saltiness' to make it worthwhile, a believer's faith is all that he or she has of real value to God. If we choose to compromise with the world instead of maintaining a distinctive identity centered on God, then we cease to be 'salty'. Those who have faith are truly the light of the world, and this light must be allowed to shine. We are not here to gain praise for ourselves, but to bring praise to our God and Father.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it mean to be 'blessed'? In what sense are we 'blessed' if we have the qualities Jesus commends? What kinds of blessings do the 'blessed' receive? How does a good general perspective on this passage help when we study a specific Beatitude? What is the 'saltiness' that a believer has? How do we keep it? How can we let our light 'shine'? What do these verses tell us about Jesus himself?

The Law & The Heart (Matthew 5:17-42)

Jesus' next several points contrast the fleshly perspective and the godly perspective with regard to the Law. Humans tend to have strongly ambivalent feelings about law, resenting some of its requirements while applying other requirements too strictly or literally. Jesus shows us that our hearts must change before we can understand, use, and apply law correctly.

Although Jesus often corrected the ways that the religious leaders of his day understood the Law, he emphasized the permanence of God's law in itself (5:17-20). As Paul also explained in Romans 7, the law itself is righteous and good, despite the ways that humans misuse it. The law's demands may seem tedious or arbitrary, but only if we fail to understand their purpose. For

this reason, Jesus does not proclaim the rejection of the Law, but rather a much more complete fulfillment of it. To have a righteousness that literally surpassed that of the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the time would have been a challenging and intimidating standard indeed.

This is demonstrated by the lessons Jesus gives on applying the law, beginning with a discussion of murder, anger, and arguments (5:21-26). Far from canceling the law's command not to kill, Jesus brings a higher standard, indicating that even anger* may make us subject to judgment. While we will often have cause to be upset about the sins we see around us, we should take care not to let ourselves become angry or hateful towards specific persons. Jesus follows this point with the example of a dispute between two worshipers, calling for us to settle such matters quickly, and warning of severe consequences for those who do not try to end quarrels peacefully.

* Notice that it is the anger involved in calling someone 'Raca' or a 'fool' that brings them under danger of judgment, not the fact alone of having said something critical. Jesus himself, as well as Paul and others, did not hesitate to call someone a 'fool' or the equivalent, if it was appropriate. But Jesus is cautioning us that all such criticisms must be made without the venomous anger that can easily accompany them.

Jesus next discusses applying the Law in relation to adultery, lust, and divorce (5:27-32). In again counting a sinful desire (lust) as tantamount to a sinful action (adultery), Jesus is issuing a somber call to take the initiative against sin, by rooting out sinful desires before they cause more serious sins that produce irrevocable damage. His graphic imagery of cutting off body parts that lead us astray (see also Matthew 18:8-9) should not, of course, be taken literally. It is meant to show us the urgency and importance of quashing our sinful desires before they do serious harm.

Jesus also called his listeners to take responsibility for their marriage vows. Moses' Laws had included a provision for divorce, which the people had long since come to abuse widely. In particular, the Pharisees had even concocted the teaching that a male who conducted an immoral extra-marital affair was not committing adultery against his wife, only (if applicable) against the husband of his mistress. This is why Jesus defines adultery as a likely consequence of divorce*.

* Since Jesus discusses divorce in much more detail in Matthew 19:1-12, we shall cover his teachings on the subject when we study that chapter.

Jesus then calls us to apply the Law properly as regards our word and our rights (5:33-42). Both then and now, humans set aside special occasions (such as courtrooms) in which oaths are expected to be taken, in order to certify that they will tell the truth on these occasions. The implication of this is that it is otherwise all right to lie. For this reason, Jesus tells us that we should never swear to tell the truth, but should simply say yes when we mean yes, and say no when we mean no - in other words, we should consider that everything we say will be held up to God's standard of truth, not subject to some human judge's authority.

Likewise, the Savior urges us to accept injustices or impositions that we (ourselves, not necessarily someone else) may have to endure. Even if we have a legal right* to claim redress or compensation, this does not mean that we should. Like all that Jesus has said so far, this idea flatly contradicts the world's values, the world's perspectives, and the world's practices.

* Jesus makes reference to the Old Testament passages about 'an eye for an eye', and so forth. It is important to note that these phrases were not meant to be applied literally, and indeed there is no evidence that they ever were. They did, in their Old Testament contexts, provide the right to seek redress in kind, when possible, for harm that one person had done to another.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How do Jesus' teachings on murder and anger compare with those in the Old Testament? What would his listeners have thought of them? Answer the same questions for the other teachings in this section. What do Jesus' teachings here indicate about his overall perspective? What do they tell us about his purpose in this world?

Acts Of Genuine Love (Matthew 5:43-6:4)

One of the few things upon which most humans agree is the principle that we ought to love one another. Yet even this apparently unarguable idea can be quite hard to apply sincerely and consistently. In these verses, Jesus touches briefly on some examples that indicate how we must change our perspectives in order to practice genuine, godly love for others.

To love one's enemies is another way in which Jesus calls us to a much higher standard than that of the world, or even that of the Law (5:43-48). While it may seem almost impossible to love some of the malefactors around us, Jesus puts this in perspective by telling us about his Father. God's own compassion and providence are indiscriminate. Every day, he provides nourishment and blessings for billions of humans who ignore him or even hate him. He does this not because of their importance or because he needs their help, but simply because his own nature leads him to do so.

Practically everyone claims to love others, but in most cases this is an easy love that does not require faith or effort. The worst persons in the world love those who do nice things for them. Genuine love means to love the unlovable, to love the vicious and the hateful, to be nailed to a cross and still be able to say, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.

Finally, Jesus calls us to give for the right reasons (6:1-4). Once again, it is relatively easy to perform acts of charity when we will get credit or praise in return. And it is all too easy to give in order to receive praise or credit, rather than out of genuine compassion. The rich of this world often make grand gestures out of their charity for this reason. Jesus tells us that the most commendable giving is done in secret, so that only giver and receiver will know. This is not limited to financial giving, for we can practice this principle in other areas as well.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Jesus call us to love our enemies? What effect would this have on us? What possible motivations can we have for giving? Which are good, and which are bad? How can we practically apply Jesus' call to give in secret? Are there other passages in the gospel that illustrate Jesus' perspective? Again, what does his perspective here tell us about him?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2007

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Five: A New Perspective - Part Two (Matthew 6:5-7:29)

In the first portion of 'The Sermon On The Mount', Jesus said a great many things that would have startled his audience by the ways that his teachings contradicted the beliefs of the world. In the last half of his discourse, he goes even further in his description of the godly perspective and of the ways that it calls us to live for something much greater than anything in this world.

Review of Recent Classes

In the early days of Jesus' ministry (Matthew 4), he first endured a period of temptation in the wilderness. Then he began his public ministry in Galilee, calling to him a small number of devoted believers, while at the same time conducting a public ministry of teaching and healing.

In 'The Sermon On the Mount', Jesus speaks of a new perspective for God's people. In the first half of the lesson (Matthew 5:1-6:4), Jesus describes true blessedness in the series of blessings known as the 'Beatitudes'. Believers are to have a perspective different from that of the world, and should let their light shine in the world. Jesus did not come to do away with the Law, but to show us how to use it correctly, by a higher standard. He also calls for genuine love: we should love even our enemies, and should give for the right reasons, not to receive praise or recognition.

Since most believers are familiar with most of the details and specifics in Matthew 5-7, our study will focus primarily on understanding the overall perspective that Jesus is teaching. This then can help us better to understand and apply the many individual points in these chapters.

Sincerity in Worship (Matthew 6:5-18)

Jesus had a thorough understanding of human nature, and though he had deep compassion on the crowds to whom he spoke, he never held back when exposing the spiritual problems in their minds and hearts. It is a struggle for all of us to worship God sincerely, not merely to be seen by others. In teaching this, Jesus also shows us his own deep and sincere faith in his Father.

Although his listeners already knew that prayer was an essential part of any relationship with God, Jesus explained that they had much to learn about prayer (6:5-13). Prayer is never a performance for the benefit of others. It should not be a means to impress others with our 'spirituality', nor should it be used to preach to other humans. The most sincere prayers are those unseen to other persons, but heard and appreciated by the unseen God.

Worthwhile and meaningful prayers do not have to be lengthy, nor do they need to be expressed in flowery or ceremonial language. As an illustration, Jesus offers his listeners an example of prayer that is often known as 'The Lord's Prayer'*. It is indeed remarkable how many sincere spiritual desires of the heart are packed into only a handful of sentences in this prayer.

* It is so called because Jesus, the Lord, offered it. This very prayer, wonderful in itself, is often recited by rote without an understanding of its content - the very kind of problem that Jesus was trying to cure.

The 'Lord's Prayer' opens with an expression of longing for God's kingdom to be made manifest, and for God's will to be achieved and honored. In his earthly human body, Jesus must have felt this desire even more keenly than before, having become intimately acquainted with human weakness and need. The middle part of the prayer likewise dwells on our complete dependence on God for everything, from protection to sustenance. It ends with a heartfelt prayer to be forgiven and to be able to forgive, a plea that leads Jesus to his next point.

The forgiveness of sins was central to Jesus' perspective and to his ministry (6:14-15). Mercy and grace are all-important in our relationship with God, for if he does not forgive us of our sins, we can have no fellowship with him. Likewise, mercy and grace are also essential in our relationships with each other. The world instead emphasizes what they falsely call 'love', expecting emotions and desires alone to create good relationships. Jesus knows better - we must forgive one another, and we must seek forgiveness from God.

Jesus makes a briefer mention of the appropriate way to fast* (6:16-18). Religious persons of his day often fasted, but in such a way as to displease God, not to please him. They would put on a show, making sure that everyone knew that they were 'sacrificing' and doing something 'spiritual'. Jesus coldly tells such persons that their only reward for this will be the fleeting feeling of self-righteousness that they get from having others know that they are fasting. Once again, God asks his people to worship and serve him as if no one else saw what they were doing.

* Notice that neither here nor anywhere else in the Bible is there a command to fast on a regular basis. The practice of fasting originated in ancient human-made religions, and was adopted by the Jews on their own initiative. When done for the right reasons, God accepted it - see, for example, 2 Chronicles 20:3, Ezra 8:21, Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:3, 4:16, Joel 1:14, 2:15, and Jonah 3:5. For examples of fasting that did not please God, see 1 Kings 21:7-14, Isaiah 58:3-8, Jeremiah 14:10-12, and Zechariah 7.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is it easy to fall into the bad prayer habits that Jesus describes here? How can we learn from 'The Lord's Prayer' without simply repeating it word-for-word? What importance does grace have in relation to prayer? What does this passage teach us about Jesus himself?

Seek First His Kingdom (Matthew 6:19-34)

This passage is the heart of the great discourse in Matthew 5-7, and it calls us to a complete reappraisal of our perspectives. The points that Jesus makes here can be a crucial foundation for understanding what he came to do. For the first of many times, Jesus makes it emphatically clear that he and his true followers seek a kingdom, a realm, a world, that is not part of this earth.

Jesus asks us to consider where we look in search of 'treasure' (6:19-24). There are all kinds of ways in which humans try to store up treasures (whether material or otherwise) in this world, but in every case, such treasures can never be secure. Because everything in this world can always be lost, stolen, or damaged, those who seek to store up earthly treasure will never have enough to bring lasting peace and contentment.

Jesus uses the eye to represent the direction in which we orient our lives to seek value, meaning, and purpose. This 'lamp of the body' guides every decision and action. We inevitably make any important decision based on what we consider, in our hearts, to be important and worthwhile. In the long run, we cannot serve two masters; we cannot try to serve God while trying to cling to as much as possible in this world. Those who try will eventually do one of two things: either they will give up on God, since he makes it too hard to get what they want on this earth, or else they will finally realize the futility of the world, and commit their way to God once for all.

This leads into Jesus' well-known exhortation for us not to worry* about the things in our daily lives (6:25-34). We have much less control over our lives than we like to acknowledge. Jesus uses several lessons from nature to remind us that it is God who makes all the arrangements for us to receive what we need. Just as God provides plants and animals with the things they need, so also he will provide for us. We should not become pre-occupied with obtaining the things of this world - even our genuine needs - at the expense of seeking God and his kingdom. To seek first his kingdom does not mean that we must go out of our way to deprive ourselves, but it does mean we should allow God to take care of us, while we learn how better to know and serve him.

* The word Jesus uses does not refer to 'worry' merely in the sense of negative emotions such as anxiety or apprehension, which are often involuntary. Rather, the word used here suggests a practice of actively straining and striving in an attempt to make sure that we get the things that we desire or feel that we need.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does Jesus mean by 'treasure'? Does it have to be material? Why must we choose between God and the world? Why does Jesus tell us not to worry? What does he want us to be concerned about instead? What does it mean to seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness? How did Jesus himself exemplify the teachings that he gives here?

Implications Of The New Perspective (Matthew 7:1-29)

Now that Jesus has made it clear that he is here not for worldly purposes but to fulfill a heavenly ministry, he proceeds to outline some important implications of this. The teachings in the rest of the lesson are intended to guide us through the ups and downs of earthly life, by reminding us at all times to remain focused on things above, just as Jesus did.

Only when we adjust our overall perspective, as Jesus has called us to do, can we then make spiritually accurate evaluations of others, of ourselves, and of God (7:1-12). The tendency to judge and the tendency to be hypocritical are, unfortunately, an entrenched part of human nature. It is too easy to see others' faults as greater than they really are, while rationalizing away any flaws of our own. Only by seeking our treasure in heaven, not on this earth, can we find the humility and wisdom that we need in order to see things in the proper light.

Jesus also calls us to value sacred things above worldly things, and not to use them lightly. We would not give valuable possessions to pigs or other domestic creatures, for they would not appreciate them, and indeed would probably ruin them. Likewise, we ought to realize that in Jesus we have spiritual blessings of incalculable value, and these should not be treated with disdain merely because they do not shine and sparkle like the crass treasures of the world. We

should especially not allow unbelievers to hear us downplay or denigrate the value of forgiveness of sins, of eternal life, or of the many other blessings we have in Jesus.

We should also remember that God is our Father above, who gives us every truly good gift. Jesus' famous saying in verses 7-8 is often misunderstood and misapplied. It is, in fact, conditioned on the development of the new perspective he is teaching. To those who seek things of eternal and spiritual value, and who seek them for the right reasons, God opens up his fountain of blessings whenever they seek, ask, or knock. When instead we decline to adopt a genuinely godly perspective, and then do not get the things we ask for, we ought not to blame God but should instead re-examine our attitudes, expectations, and motivations.

Just as plants produce fruit after their own kind, so also do both good (spiritual) fruit and bad (worldly) fruit grow naturally out of the perspectives in our hearts and minds (7:13-23). Jesus warns us that the road to true life is the narrow one, and thus a genuine believer will always be in the minority in this world. To find this alarming or uncomfortable is entirely understandable. But to resist it or to try to argue against Jesus' statement is both futile and faithless. It is a simple truth of humanity that most persons simply will not ever respond to God's call in the way that he desires. No amount of work or good intentions on our part can change this.

There will also be false prophets among us always, and they will produce the kind of bad fruit that comes naturally for them. Jesus describes them as wolves in sheep's clothing, pretending to be loving and harmless while concealing the deadly danger that they pose to our souls. God's Word contains many wonderfully encouraging teachings, but it also contains stark truths that we must accept if we wish to follow God, rather than our own will. If any teacher or leader says only the things that an audience wants to hear, that person is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

One way that false prophets can lead themselves and others astray is to become the kind of busy false believers that Jesus describes here. No matter what fleshly logic may tell us, our relationship with God never depends on religious activity or on outward results, and indeed these things in themselves do not even prove that we have God's favor. The picture that Jesus paints here is alarming, but true. Yet we need not worry about ending up this way if we keep the proper perspective, serving and seeking God for his own sake, and allowing him to decide how, when, where, and even if he wishes to use us for some concrete purpose.

Our lives and ministries will eventually reveal whether we have built a strong foundation or a weak foundation (7:24-29). Those who build on the strong foundation of God's Word, faith in God, humility, and other aspects of the godly perspective, will have a foundation strong enough to hold up during the storms and stresses of life in this world. But others, who seek God only for the pleasures and rewards they hope to find in this world, will one day find to their regret that this weak, sandy foundation has been washed away.

It is certainly no surprise that the crowds were so amazed at Jesus' extraordinary teachings. Even Christians often have little awareness of just how much the world affects our perspectives. Jesus tells us, very honestly and very explicitly, that the world is wrong about everything that matters. Even its many factual errors are trivial compared to its errors of priority and perspective. The world never has the right answers, because it does not even know the right questions to ask.

The world has no understanding of what is truly important, and thus has nothing to say that we believers need to hear or obey. Its apparent wisdom and its false pretensions often seem convincing at first glance, but Jesus' wisdom reveals them for what they are. Praise be to God that Jesus does not merely wipe away the lies and folly of the world, but that he also brings a new, positive way of living and thinking that gives us a rock-solid foundation for eternity.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does a godly perspective help us to see others and their flaws more objectively? How does it help us to see our own flaws more truthfully? How can we be sure to bear good fruit? How can we be sure to walk on the 'narrow road'? How can we build a solid foundation? What was Jesus' own foundation?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2007*

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Six: Divine Power & Authority (Matthew 8)

The Sermon On The Mount' gave us a detailed example of Jesus' teaching and of the new perspective that he brought to faithful believers. Matthew now furnishes us with some examples of Jesus' divine power and authority. These include miraculous healings and other actions that demonstrate Jesus' absolute power and divine authority in this universe.

Review of Recent Classes: A New Perspective (Matthew 5, 6, & 7)

Jesus' 'Sermon On The Mount' begins with a statement of true blessedness, which we often call the 'Beatitudes'. True blessedness depends on what God values, not on what the world values. For this reason, we who believe must let our light shine in this world (5:1-16). Jesus did not come to do away with Law, but to show us how to follow the law in our hearts. In applying the law to such matters as murder, anger, adultery, and lust, Jesus calls believers to a higher standard (5:17-42). We are also called to practice genuine love, even loving those who harm us or oppose us. And we should give for the right reasons, not with expectation of praise or reward (5:43-6:4).

Jesus also teaches us about sincerity in worship, especially in prayer. His own sincere prayers express deep spiritual needs in simple, humble terms, and they emphasize the need for mutual grace and forgiveness. He makes similar points about fasting for the right reasons, a lesson that we can also apply to a number of areas of ministry (6:5-18).

In the heart of this great lesson, Jesus tells to seek first God's kingdom, realizing how much greater it is than the world. For whatever we consider to be treasure - that is, whatever we think is important - this will determine the direction that our hearts will go. We thus should not strive, worry, and fret in our pursuit of worldly things (6:19-34). These lessons have many implications, in terms of judging ourselves, judging one another, and understanding God. The direction of our hearts will determine whether we bear good fruit or bad fruit, and it will reveal whether we have a strong foundation or a weak one (7:1-29).

In all of these things, Jesus contradicts and refutes the perspectives, priorities, and 'wisdom' of the world. In every era and in every human culture, the world constantly reinforces the need to find meaning in the things that it values in this life. Because the world's focus is on this life, it cannot have the right perspective on spiritual matters. We must therefore lose our faith in the world in order to gain faith in God. We must question and doubt anything the world tells us, as their lies are repeated so often that we can come to accept them without any conscious decision.

Divine Power & Human Faith (Matthew 8:1-17)

Matthew now gives us a few examples of the kinds of miraculous healings that Jesus frequently performed. Besides showing us how Jesus used his power in compassionate ways, the healings also demonstrate that Jesus held power and authority even over diseases and death. The apostle also makes sure to point out the faith of some of those who sought Jesus as a healer.

In the simple account of Jesus healing a leper (8:1-4), we see a number of useful points. In saying to Jesus, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean', the leper shows a degree of faith, not only in Jesus' power but also in his kindness. Jesus showed considerable compassion by deliberately touching the man, who probably had not felt human contact since he had fallen ill*. Jesus also sends him away with the curious instruction not to tell anyone** about the healing, but instead simply to go through the rites that were required to become 'clean' again.

* The Law of Moses imposed strict conditions limiting the contact that lepers (which included those suffering from a number of severe skin diseases) could have with others. The Scriptural commands came from God, but by the first century AD, the religious leaders had added many additional conditions of a more humiliating and hurtful nature.

** Jesus often said this to those whom he had healed, especially early in his ministry. Naturally, it did not prevent word from spreading, and it seems probable that Jesus, with his understanding of human nature, knew what to expect. No definitive answer for this request is given in the Scriptures. If the healed had followed his request, it would have saved them from the kinds of possible repercussions that were faced, for example, by the blind man in John 9. It is also possible that Jesus wanted to avoid undue attention for the wrong reasons, but again he could hardly have expected everyone to keep silent about the miracles.

When a centurion with a sick servant comes to see Jesus (8:5-13), it illustrates several more points. When Jesus makes the generous and compassionate offer to come to the centurion's home in order to heal the servant, the centurion surprisingly declines. Besides feeling unworthy, he also explains to Jesus what he understands about the nature of authority, for he has grasped that Jesus is no mere magician or natural wonder. As simple as this point is (and no doubt the centurion still had many things to learn about faith), Jesus is so encouraged that he commends the centurion's faith, and by comparison he criticizes the much more limited faith of many who considered themselves God's people and yet failed to see, in even a basic way, who Jesus was.

Matthew adds here that Jesus performed a great many healings that are not recorded (8:14-17). Healings were such a part of his ministry that we should not imagine them being limited only to the specific episodes found in the gospel accounts. Besides the other aspects of the healings, they also fulfilled a prophecy from Isaiah 53:4. That Jesus took up these physical ailments and weaknesses was only a prelude to the time when he would take upon himself the far more serious spiritual disorders and sins from which every human suffers.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What general purpose was served by Jesus' miraculous healings? What specific points are illustrated by the healings of the leper and of the centurion's servant? What do we learn about faith from these incidents? What do we learn about Jesus himself?

The Call To Follow Jesus (Matthew 8:18-22)

The apostle records here two seemingly inconsequential incidents, in order to illustrate a point about Jesus' call to his followers. Two different persons approach Jesus and indicate their desire to follow him, yet in each case he gives them what seems like a negative response. Jesus did so not in order to discourage them, but to clarify what it truly means to follow him.

The first individual comes to Jesus saying, 'I will follow you wherever you go' (8:18-20). No doubt the sentiment was sincere in its way, yet Jesus answers quite brusquely. Jesus does, of course, want everyone to follow him, but in this case there was a point that needed to be made.

In warning this would-be follower that 'the Son of Man*' has no place to lay his head', Jesus is suggesting that this believer has little understanding of what it takes to follow Jesus in truth. Indeed today, few who call themselves 'Christians', followers of Christ, are willing to alter their lifestyles or to sacrifice comfort and convenience. Yet even at this early point in his ministry, Jesus makes it clear that this is exactly what he wants. Indeed, in the previous chapters he has openly explained that his values and standards are far different from those of the world.

* The first time that this phrase is used in Matthew. It emphasizes the humanity and, especially, the mortality of Jesus in his human form. Being Son of Man was no less important than being the Son of God.

The next one to come to Jesus promises to follow him, but asks to be allowed to bury his father first (8:21-22). Whereas the first man in this passage* was simply naïve, Jesus' reply suggests that this man was insincere. Taken literally, Jesus' words would seem to be cruel and cold**, but his statement here is not meant to be taken to a literal extreme (compare it with, for example, Matthew 5:29-30). Instead, he knows that this man is making a show of 'devotion' while feeling in his heart that he has a good excuse not to have to prove it just yet. Jesus' says to 'let the dead bury their own dead' not to be callous, but rather to expose the excuse for what it was.

* Luke 9:57-62 records these same incidents, plus a third person with a different delaying tactic.

** Because some commentators take Jesus too literally, and thus fail to understand his point, they have invented a scenario under which this man's father was not yet dead, so that he would be asking permission to wait until that happened. If this were the case, then Jesus' answer would not seem so harsh. But this scenario is unlikely (based on the way it is worded in the original text), and it is unnecessary to resort to it.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How are these two persons representative of common attitudes towards following Jesus? What kinds of situations would be similar? Why does Jesus respond as sharply as he does? Did he want them to follow him at all? What does this reveal about Jesus himself?

Universal Power, Faith, & Fear (Matthew 8:23-34)

The next two incidents show us more about Jesus' power. In calming the storm, he demonstrates power over forces of nature. In dealing with the demon-possessed men, he displays authority even over evil spirits. There is nothing in the universe that is not subject to Jesus' authority. Yet we see another common feature in these two examples, as in each case Jesus' power inspires fear.

In calming a storm while he and his disciples are crossing the lake (8:23-27), Jesus shows another aspect of his power and authority. As the storm grows more menacing, the disciples become terrified and frantic, yet Jesus is calmly sleeping. After he is awakened, he first reproves them for losing their faith and perspective, and then calms the storm.

Their response is one of amazement and, as Mark and Luke tell us (see Mark 4:41 and Luke 8:25), they are also afraid of the power they have just seen on display. Their sincere question, 'what kind of man is this', shows us that they can perceive an unimaginably great power at work in their presence. Because they cannot conceive of or understand how a person could command wind, waves, and natural forces to obey him, they are also frightened. Their response is rather typical of those who come face to face with the real Jesus.

The tumultuous incident in the region of the Gadarenes*, which Matthew describes next (8:28-34), illustrates some similar points. Jesus must face an unusual situation: two violent demon-possessed men**, who apparently live in a graveyard, approach Jesus aggressively. But, as always, Jesus is not flustered; he simply begins to converse with them.

* Mark and Luke refer to it as the region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26). Gerasa was a small town near the east shore of the Sea of Galilee. (Note that there was a larger Roman-built town, also called Gerasa, much further from the lake, which often creates confusion for commentators.) Gadara was one of the towns that were part of the Decapolis (The Ten Cities), and although it was some distance from the lake, it controlled and administered the territory that included Gerasa.

** Mark and Luke both refer to one demoniac only, which arouses claims of 'contradictions' from skeptical commentators. It is usually understood that there were two men, with one of the two who was the more aggressive and who did most or all of the talking. In any case, it is actually the demons who speak to Jesus.

Jesus even allows the demons to make a request, which he accommodates. The demons know that he has authority over them, and they do not want to be left without a body to inhabit. Jesus grants them permission to enter the members of a nearby herd of pigs*, but the pigs are so incapable of bearing the powerful spirits that they panic and drown themselves in the lake. This must have been quite a spectacle, and in that sense we can understand the frightened reaction of the townspeople, who ask Jesus to leave their region entirely. They too have seen divine power on display, and were helpless to control it or even to understand it.

* Many Gentiles lived in the regions near the Sea of Galilee, so it would not be unusual to find pigs there.

It is impossible to meet the genuine Jesus and not have a reaction or response. The Jesus of the gospels is never just a 'good man' or a 'moral teacher' or a 'spiritual philosopher'. His true identity is far more glorious, and it is also more unsettling to anyone who lives for this world alone. We are so familiar with vapid, superficial portrayals of Jesus, from the world and even from many who label themselves Christians, that we ourselves must often remind ourselves of who he really was.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does Jesus' ability to calm the storm reveal about who he is? Why were the disciples frightened by it? What does the incident among the Gadarenes show about Jesus? Why did those persons respond as they did? What parallels might we find in our experience?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2007*

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Seven: Lessons On Priorities (Matthew 9:1-34)

In the previous chapter, Matthew gave several detailed accounts of miracles and other actions that Jesus performed. In each case, these demonstrated his power and authority over everything in this world, from diseases to material things to forces of nature. These next few examples will continue this theme, while also teaching us about the things that are most important to God.

Review of Recent Classes

In 'The Sermon On the Mount', Jesus describes a new perspective based entirely on God's values, not on those of the world (Matthew 5, 6, & 7). The teachings in this lesson also show us how our basic perspective will inevitably affect our lives and our relationship with God.

Next, the apostle describes several examples of Jesus' divine power and authority (Matthew 8). The relation between divine power and human faith is illustrated in the healings of a leper and of a centurion's servant. In each case, those seeking help had only a 'mustard seed' worth of faith, but that was enough, for it is Jesus' calling to take up our infirmities and diseases (cf. Isaiah 53)

The serious nature of following Jesus is illustrated by his replies to two would-be disciples. He warns an enthusiastic seeker that 'the Son of Man has no place to lay his head', and exposes the excuse of a man who asks to bury his father before following. Jesus' universal power is shown against the contrast of faith and fear. He calms a storm that terrified his disciples, then heals two demoniacs, provoking a tumultuous incident that results in him being asked to leave the area.

Physical Healing & Spiritual Healing (Matthew 9:1-8)

When a paralytic is brought to Jesus by some devoted friends, Jesus uses the occasion not only to heal the man's ailment, but also to raise an even more important point. Just as it requires great power to heal a paralyzed man, so also it takes great authority to grant genuine forgiveness of sins. Jesus leaves it to his hearers to consider which kind of healing is more important.

In healing the paralytic (9:1-8), Jesus calls his observers to consider another aspect of his power. Since the paralytic is unable to help himself, some friends carry him on a mat to Jesus. (See also Mark 2:1-12 and Luke 5:17-26, which describe it in more detail*.) Perhaps seeing in these persons a measure of faith greater than usual, Jesus responds in a most curious fashion. It must have struck many of the observers as either a non sequitur or a joke when, after all the effort required to bring the paralytic to Jesus, Jesus responds by telling him that his sins are forgiven.

* In particular, the other gospel writers tell us that this took place indoors, and that the paralytic's friends had to lower the mat through a hole in the roof.

Some, though, grasp the implications of Jesus' statement, and consider it blasphemous. They realize that only God can grant forgiveness of sins, and they do not acknowledge Jesus as divine. Jesus knows their thoughts, and he asks them a pointed, yet simple question. From a human

perspective, it is much more difficult to heal a severe physical ailment like paralysis than it is to pronounce the forgiveness of sin. Jesus knows, though, that spiritual healing is more important to our souls, and he is also aware of the steep price that must be paid to make it available.

Even before Jesus heals the paralytic, then, he presents the healing as a way of demonstrating his authority to forgive sin. The healing itself, certainly, drew the attention of most of the crowd, yet it is significant that Jesus made a special effort to emphasize the importance of the forgiveness of sins. Of all the human infirmities and illnesses that Jesus took upon himself, the burden of human sin was by far the heaviest and by far the most important.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is the significance of the efforts made by the paralytic's friends? Why did Jesus at first ignore his physical need? Why did some of the teachers of the law react as they did? What lessons was Jesus trying to demonstrate? What might the observers have thought about the incident?

Jesus Answers Religious Critics (Matthew 9:9-17)

Jesus' ministry quickly drew considerable scrutiny from those who considered themselves to be 'religious'. When he called the tax collector Matthew to follow him, it caused the Pharisees to question his motives. Soon afterwards, another group asked him to justify the lack of fasting by him and his disciples. In both cases, Jesus corrects the priorities of his interrogators.

Matthew the tax collector* describes his own calling (9:9-13), as an interesting comparison with the calling of the four fishermen (Matthew 4:18-22). As with the fishermen, Matthew is busy at his work when Jesus called him. Yet he too leaves it all behind when Jesus said the simple but powerful words, 'follow me'. Once again, Jesus deliberately chooses someone from a lowly (though, in this case, well-paid) profession. But it is not for that reason alone, for very few tax collectors would have left their booths and receipts behind them as Matthew did. This faithful disciple risked repercussions from his Roman employers as well as heavy financial loss.

* Matthew was part of a tax collecting approach that was sometimes called 'tax farming' in later centuries. An individual tax collector such as Matthew would be assigned (by the Romans or by a chief tax collector) a quota to collect. The tax collector would get to keep a portion of any taxes he collected over the quota. This gave the tax collectors a strong incentive to extort as much as possible from their 'customers', and this (as well as their collaboration with the Romans) was one of the major reasons for their unpopularity.

Unlike the fishermen, Matthew was a man of ample means, and in his joy at knowing Jesus he invites many of his friends to join him and Jesus at dinner. Given Matthew's social status, the dinner party consists mainly of tax collectors and other social outcasts*. Jesus himself naturally stood out in such company, and the Pharisees are quick to question his choice of dinner partners.

* The expression 'sinners' refers to those who did not or could not keep the Jewish laws of purity and tithing. This generally corresponded with persons whose lifestyles or careers were also unpopular or questionable. Depending on the context, it can refer to Jews, Gentiles, or both.

When Jesus heard about their comments (which were addressed not to him but to his disciples), he responds succinctly yet brilliantly*. His reference to the 'healthy' and the 'sick' (or 'the righteous' and 'sinners') does not refer to those who have no sin versus those who have sin, but

rather to those who realize their sin versus those who deny it. The Pharisees and many others of similar mind-sets failed to see their own sin, considering themselves to be morally superior to others. Therefore they refuse to see the spiritual 'doctor' to seek forgiveness. Matthew and his friends rejoice because they have known their sin all along, and have now found the cure for it.

* In verse 13, Jesus also quotes from Hosea 6:6. He will again use this significant Scriptural reference in Matthew 12:7, and so we shall discuss Hosea's meaning then.

Soon afterward, Jesus is questioned about fasting (9:14-17). This time, the question comes from some disciples of John the Baptist*. John's lifestyle and personal habits were noteworthy for their rigorous self-denial**, and those who followed him seem to have adopted similar ways. Yet this was never the point of John's ministry. John's responsibility was to declare the way clear for Jesus to come after him, yet many who followed him missed the point, seeing only the externals (a common problem in any era, of course) and imitating them without understanding.

* It was never the point of John's ministry to have disciples of his own, yet it was inevitable that his distinctive style and message would attract attention to him personally. John pointed his followers to Jesus (as in John 1:35-37), but those who considered themselves John's disciples did not always accept John's own message about the superiority of Jesus. Another example of this is John 3:25-30.

** Luke 1:15 implies that this lifestyle was determined for John even before he was born.

In response, Jesus uses three brief figures of speech (or short parables). He first refers to himself as a bridegroom, and his disciples as the guests of the bridegroom. The point of the image is that a wedding is meant to be a joyous occasion, and thus the time of Jesus physical presence on earth does not, at least in itself, call for fasting.

The other two images refer to the incongruity of trying to mix new and old*. If one uses a piece of brand-new fabric as a patch for an old garment, then when the patch shrinks from washing, the hole will quickly re-appear. Likewise, if new (that is, unfermented) wine is poured into an old (hardened) wineskin, then when the wine releases the dissolved gases and expands, the pressure will burst the wineskin.

* These images rely to some degree on familiarity with the everyday materials of the time. All commonly used fabrics were subject to shrinking when washed. Wine was stored in bottle-like pouches made from animal skins. New pouches were flexible and could be used for unfermented wine, while older pouches became hard and brittle. They were usable only for older wine that had finished fermenting.

Jesus' point is that he brings a new ministry, a new perspective, and much else that is new. Any expectations of Jesus based on human perspective, habit, or experience would be misleading and probably wrong. Jesus gave ample proofs that he was God's own Son, and it didn't matter whether he fit human opinions of what he ought to have been like.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is the significance of Jesus calling a tax collector? What implications does it have for us? What points is he trying to make when he answers criticisms of his association with 'sinners'? Why did some persons expect Jesus and his disciples to fast? What other kinds of human expectations can hinder our understanding of Jesus? In what sense was and is Jesus 'new'?

More Healings With A Point (Matthew 9:18-34)

Jesus continues to use his divine power to grant relief to suffering humans. In this series of examples, we can particularly see Jesus' unhurried, patient approach to those who seek his help. He takes this approach even when it was likely to raise the anxiety level of those in search of healing. These are useful examples to remember whenever we too look to him for help.

Matthew now describes two healings that take place in succession, with one actually interrupted so that Jesus could perform the other, as a way of helping us to appreciate Jesus' way of thinking as he carries out his ministry (9:18-26). This rather hectic sequence of events begins with a synagogue ruler* urgently seeking Jesus on account of his daughter, who has just died**. Jesus agrees to help, and proceeds to the man's home. Yet even as he is on his way, another sufferer comes to Jesus in search of healing.

* This would be the most likely identification from Matthew's description of him, and it is confirmed in Mark and Luke. In general, the accounts in Mark 5:21-43 and Luke 8:40-56 are much more detailed than Matthew 9, and the other gospels bring out Jesus' patience and compassion even more clearly.

** The other gospels clarify this, indicating that she was alive when the ruler left home, but then died by the time that Jesus had performed the first healing in this passage. As just noted above, Matthew's account considerably abridges the entire sequence of events.

No doubt the synagogue ruler is greatly agitated and anxious, and Jesus alone has the power to calm him and to heal (or raise) the child. Yet Jesus is then approached by a woman with her own severe problem, a painful hemorrhage that has plagued her for twelve years. His compassion moves him not only to heal her, but also to speak to her and comfort her (again, see also Mark and Luke). All the while, the other man's anxiety must have been increasing.

Yet the girl is made well after all, for Jesus raises her from the dead. Thus death itself is added to the list of forces over which Jesus has power and authority. Then also, in this episode we can see something about his perspective on our lives. Even when he has already resolved to help someone, he may well take time in the interim to help someone else, or simply to give comfort. We can become spoiled by God's many blessings to the point where we not only expect them as our due, but even expect them right away. Let us always trust Jesus that he truly does know what it is like to live in this world. When he does not act on our schedule, he has good reasons.

Jesus' healings also continued to be the source of accusations against him (9:27-34). Once again, we see Jesus respond to a heartfelt cry for mercy, this time from two blind men. This time Jesus makes a point of asking them whether they believe in his power to heal them, and after restoring their sight we see him give them his frequent warning not to tell anyone. Yet, especially when he then heals a mute man, news of what Jesus has done spreads quickly.

For their part, the Pharisees react with a new accusation against Jesus. This time, they decide that he is using demonic power to perform his miracles. Their lack of logic is evident in their suggestion that he is calling on the prince of demons (*i.e.* Satan) to use his power to drive out demons. Of course, their motivation is neither logical nor spiritual. Although they are perceived as religious leaders, in actuality they have an entirely earthly, fleshly way of thinking.

This is what inevitably happens when anyone sees Jesus for who he truly is. When we see who Jesus claims to be, what he was able to do, and what he calls us to do, we can only do one of two things. We must either follow him without reservation, or else find some pretext for dismissing him entirely. Matthew has already shown us this a number of times, and he will continue to do so throughout his account of the gospel.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is it significant that Jesus stopped to talk to the suffering woman while he was already on his way to help someone else? What ought we to learn about this? Why did the Pharisees accuse Jesus of using demonic power? Did they have any reason to believe this? Did they really believe it at all? What parallels might we find or experience?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2007*

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Eight: Like Sheep Among Wolves (Matthew 9:35-10:42)

As Jesus carried out his ministry of teaching and healing, he maintained a great feeling of compassion for humanity. Preparing the faithful for ministry was an important part of his work on the earth. Yet he also knew how ill-prepared we humans are to minister to one another. In these verses, we can see some of the ways that he readied his disciples for what was ahead.

Review of Recent Classes

In the 'Sermon on the Mount', Jesus taught a new perspective for those who would believe in him (Matthew 5, 6, & 7), calling them to look beyond this world and its values. He furnished numerous examples of his divine power and authority (Matthew 8), demonstrating his supremacy over every entity and every force in this world.

Jesus also brought new priorities (Matthew 9:1-34). In healing the paralytic on the mat, Jesus pointed out that spiritual healing (forgiveness of sins) is even more important than physical healing. He responded wisely to critics: after eating at the home of the tax collector Matthew, he told the Pharisees that he came to help those who knew they were spiritually sick, not those who erroneously thought they were healthy. To other questioners, he said that he has brought a new way that should not be evaluated in the same terms as the old way. He also performed healings with a point, first demonstrating patience and compassion even when his help was urgently sought elsewhere, and then continuing to heal even when it provoked unfair accusations.

Sheep Without A Shepherd (Matthew 9:35-10:4)

Jesus likens humans to sheep without a shepherd, because most persons have little direction to their lives, have no real purpose greater than themselves, and have no idea where to go for real help. Jesus prayed for workers to go out into the harvest field, but even more than that, he specifically chose and trained a special group of disciples for this kind of ministry.

Jesus observes that there are many spiritual needs, but that, 'the workers are few' (9:35-38). Jesus has now begun to take his ministry into a wider area, and he routinely attracts large crowds. Seeing so many persons causes Jesus to exclaim upon their need for a shepherd. His compassion on them was not merely a surface compassion, such as those in the world express.

Politicians, newscasters, celebrities, and other public nuisances are always trying to convince us that they care about us. But they do so only in order to acquire more power, wealth, and acclaim at our expense. Jesus showed his compassion by sacrificing his power, his comfort, and his rights as the Son of God. Not only did he come to live with his sheep, but he even became a lamb. Nor is he concerned merely about our financial condition, or even our physical health. What arouses Jesus' compassion is the realization that humans are, by nature, harassed and helpless, at the mercy of anything and everything in the uncaring world around us.

There are far too few workers for the vast number of spiritual needs. Notice, though, that Jesus teaches his disciples to view this positively. Rather than seeing an unsolvable problem, Jesus sees a potential harvest. He does not appeal to the government to legislate the needs away, he does not ask for money so that he can fix them, nor does he use pat answers to rationalize them or explain them away. He instead tells us to pray for caring helpers to go into the harvest field.

This was hardly mere talk on Jesus' part, for it is now that he sends the Twelve out for their first missionary experience (10:1-4). They are now workers in the harvest field, given divine authority over disease and evil spirits, just as Jesus himself possessed.

Matthew lists the twelve apostles* here for the first time. They are quite a varied group in many respects, and indeed few of them would have been chosen as leaders by the world's standards. Yet they were united by a common faith in Jesus. When he called them, they left behind whatever they were doing; they abandoned their boats, their tax receipts, their political activities, and everything else to follow Jesus.

* There are also complete lists of the Twelve in Mark 3, Luke 6, and (without Judas) in Acts 1. John mentions many of them by name in various places, although he never lists all twelve. Because ancient Jewish giving and usage of names varied somewhat from our own customs, there are apparent differences in these lists. But most of these can be explained most simply, and none of them are actual 'contradictions'. Matthew, for example, also went by the Jewish name Levi. Bartholomew (or Bar-Tolmai) is what we would call a 'last' name, not a given name, and this person is almost certainly the same as Nathaniel. Other correspondences can be found in many commentaries.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways are the crowds harassed and helpless? Does this also characterize us and the persons around us? What ought our response to this be? What does Jesus mean by workers? What does he mean by a harvest? How does Jesus' compassion differ from the world's claims to be compassionate? What general characteristics of the twelve apostles hold lessons for us?

Instructions For The Present Journey (Matthew 10:5-16)

Jesus first prepares the twelve for a specific missionary assignment in the present*. He gives them a limited (yet still challenging) assignment to carry out, which will allow them to experience on a smaller scale the things that they will often encounter after Jesus returns to heaven. Before they go out, Jesus makes sure to discuss their instructions and their expectations.

* Note that Luke 10, in which Jesus sends out not twelve but 72 of his followers, describes a separate set of events. Luke 9 describes the events that we are studying in Matthew 10.

As they make their preparations, Jesus gives them some very specific instructions (10:5-10). For this present mission, they are sent to a limited area, where they will meet only Jews. This fits in with the general plan that God had foretold*, and it also allowed the apostles to get their first missionary experience with a relatively predictable crowd.

* A full discussion of this is beyond the scope of our study. But besides the many promises and prophecies from the Old Testament, Paul also discusses the principle of 'first for the Jew, then for the Gentile' in his epistle to the Romans.

Besides the ability to heal and to perform other miracles, the apostles are given a familiar message. From John to Jesus to the Twelve, the message has been that the kingdom of heaven is near. All of the healings and other things that Jesus did focused attention on this point. Just as Jesus himself has done repeatedly, the apostles are now to demonstrate power over earthly forces, in order to call attention to a new and greater world for the faithful.

The remaining instructions are new, and are quite interesting. The apostles may take very little with them. In particular, they are not to take money or extra clothes. This will force them to rely on freely given hospitality and aid, and will serve as a constant reminder to them that they have been called out of the world. No more will they belong to this world, and in their interactions with the world they will need to rely on faith rather than a safe supply of earthly things.

Jesus then helps them to develop appropriate expectations (10:11-16). Since they will need to seek places to stay, they should be ready for a variety of responses. There will be some faithful and hospitable hosts, who should be given blessing in return for their generosity. At times, they will visit communities who simply reject the message. In this case, the apostles are told to shake the dust off their feet and put it behind them.

To learn what Jesus wants them to learn from this experience, they will need to be 'as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves'. They will need to love others without reservation, yet realize that genuine faith is rare. They will need to be completely honest about their activities and intentions, yet they will have to be resourceful and quick on their feet. Taking the message of Jesus into a world with its own agendas will never be easy. No one knew that better than Jesus.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Jesus want them to speak only to Jews? What is the significance of the message, 'the kingdom of heaven is near'? Why are they so restricted in what they can take with them? What should they think of towns that reject their message? What does it mean to be as shrewd as a snake and as innocent as a dove? What does all this show us about Jesus himself?

Perspectives For Future Ministry (Matthew 10:17-42)

Even at this early stage, Jesus wants to begin developing in his disciples the perspectives and priorities that they must have after he is gone. He knows that he has called them to a life of conflict, sacrifice, persecution, and perseverance. They will need to understand the importance of their ministry, and they will have to understand what to expect from an unbelieving world.

From now on, the apostles will need to be on their guard (10:17-23), for as soon as they start to have any significant effect, the world will counter-attack. Jesus does not want them to be unaware of the dangers that face them in the future, but neither can he distort his message to make it easier for them. The world claims to love us, but it never tells us the truth. The world does not really love us - it only wants us to love it. Only Jesus loves us enough to tell us the truth, and to urge us to nurture our truest and deepest needs, and not to seek immediate pleasure.

Being warned of the times when they would be brought on trial before worldly leaders and rulers, it would be most understandable for the disciples to be frightened and tongue-tied when this happens. Thus Jesus assures them that, when the occasion calls for it, they will receive help from the Holy Spirit, so that they will not have to worry about what to say to the governors and kings who will interrogate them. There is a long road ahead, and they will be tempted many times to give up or to turn back. At times we shall even endure opposition from family and friends. Jesus thus exhorts his disciples, and us, to stand firm all the way to the end*.

* Jesus' interesting comment at the end of verse 23 is often overlooked and/or misinterpreted. This part of Jesus' speech pertains to ministry in the years to come, not to this limited mission of the Twelve. In this context, it thus means that there will always be work to do in this world. We should not expect that there will ever come a time when everyone has heard the gospel from someone first-hand. The implication of this is that our involvement in Christian ministry should last for the rest of our lives.

Jesus urges them not to be afraid of those who seem powerful or important in this world (10:24-31). Christians should not expect to be treated with kindness, respect, or deference by the world. No student is greater than his teacher, and the powerful and influential persons of this world treated our Teacher with cruelty, callousness, and resentment. But the truth is greater than anything in this world, and the truth can set us free.

Even in the church, we can spend far too much time and energy trying to figure out what the world wants to hear, because we are afraid to tell them what they need to hear. It is a certainty that there will be a Day when everything will be revealed and exposed. If we are going to be afraid, we ought to be fearful for what will happen on that Day.

Jesus wants the Twelve always to remember the importance of this ministry (10:32-42). The primary purpose of Christian ministry is not to make this world a little better, but to lead others to a much better and more lasting world. The ministry of Jesus has eternal consequences, for if we wish Jesus to acknowledge us in heaven, then we must acknowledge him in this world without apology or shame.

Again, because Jesus loves us too much not to tell us the whole truth, we must expect to endure conflict because of the gospel. Unlike the worldly, we do not provoke conflict, enjoy conflict, or seek conflict. But neither should we fear conflict or run away from it, when it involves something of spiritual importance. Conflict is not desirable in itself, but if we resolve truly to help the harassed and helpless around us, this will automatically bring us into conflict with those who are harassing, oppressing, and manipulating them.

Jesus tells us plainly that we must love him more than anyone or anything in this world. This is a frightening standard, but a reasonable one. We humans constantly designate other humans as leaders and heroes, giving them our devotion and our hearts even though they have done little to deserve it. Jesus has shown us his love and compassion in countless ways. In order to develop a genuine faith in him, and to show him the appreciation he deserves, we must first cure ourselves of making heroes out of other persons. We are meant to love each other and to help each other seek God, not to be God for anyone else.

Jesus also takes note of the things we do for him, whether or not they are recognized by the world. He also places a high value on things we do for others in his name. Because our good deeds cannot in themselves save us, they have no value if they are done with the intent of proving ourselves righteous or of earning praise. But when they are done in the name of Jesus, as acts of faith done without expectation of reward, then, paradoxically, we do receive our spiritual reward from Jesus.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is it important to acknowledge Jesus in this world? What does he mean by 'acknowledging' him? How can the gospel cause conflicts? If we become involved in a conflict, how can we tell if it is for the right reasons? What kind of 'reward' does Jesus give to those who do things in his name?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2007

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Nine: Blessed Are Those Who Do Not Fall Away (Matthew 11)

Despite Jesus' extraordinary qualities and his unequalled love for us, it can still be very difficult for mortal humans to appreciate him and embrace him as he actually is. Jesus always knew that his message, his perspective, and his priorities would frequently confuse or frustrate even those who believed in him. He exhorts us all to remain faithful always, even when faith is all we have.

Review of Recent Classes

After teaching the crowds about the new perspective that he brought (Matthew 5, 6, & 7), Jesus provided several demonstrations of his divine power and authority (Matthew 8). He also used several situations to teach further lessons on priorities (Matthew 9:1-34).

Jesus knew that his followers are like sheep among wolves in this world (Matthew 9:35-10:42). He saw the crowds as sheep without a shepherd. When the worldly claim to have compassion, they are usually seeking power or glory or privilege, but Jesus gave up those things in order to meet our needs. This sad, lost world is ready for harvest, and so workers are needed. Thus Jesus sent out the Twelve, first on a limited journey. Jesus told them to take nothing to live on, so that they would be completely reliant on God. He also told them what kinds of responses to expect.

Jesus also taught them general perspectives for ministry. Those who do his work must always be on guard, knowing that the powers and authorities of this world will do anything to protect their own selfish interests. The world does not appreciate or respect the real Jesus, so it will not respect his faithful servants. Yet we should not be afraid, for God is in control. Above all, we must acknowledge Jesus in this world, for we want him to acknowledge us in the next. Only Jesus truly loves us. Only he gave up all he had to help us, and only he tells us the full truth.

The Elijah Who Was To Come (Matthew 11:1-19)

After John the Baptist had completed his work and had prepared the way for Jesus, he suffered greatly at the hands of King Herod. Here, when John seeks re-assurance from Jesus, Jesus first replies to John and then teaches the crowd about John's role as the Elijah figure who had been foretold. This is significant both as fulfilled prophecy and as a thematic parallel.

His ministry completed and his life in danger, John asks for re-assurance (11:1-6). He had been imprisoned by King Herod* at the instigation of Herod's vengeful wife Herodias (see chapter 14 or Mark 6). John had known all his life that he would give way to the Messiah, and was given divine assurance that Jesus was the Messiah, yet he still felt the need to ask. Perhaps suffering had created a bit of doubt in his mind, or perhaps Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching was not what John had expected. In any case, we can see that even such a selfless, devoted believer like John occasionally needs to be re-assured that God is still in control, and that God still cares.

* This is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod 'The Great' (who was king when Jesus was born).

John's disciples relay John's question to Jesus, and the Savior responds by reminding them of what he has been doing. He emphasizes the ways that the needs of the 'sick' and harassed of the world have been met. This was contrary to the emphasis expected by many of God's people, yet it was entirely in accord with what had been foretold about the Messiah, and it was entirely in accord with Jesus' own nature. Jesus simply tells John's disciples to return and report this good news, to remain faithful, and not to 'fall away' on account of what Jesus turned out to be like.

Jesus makes a number of significant observations about John and himself. John was the subject of considerable interest and excitement, and he too had been the object of a variety of expectations. Regardless of what else the populace saw in John or hoped for him to be, his ministry was that of a messenger, to prepare the way for Jesus. He was the Elijah figure* prophesied in Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6, and an indispensable part of God's plans.

* Malachi used prophetic language, and did not intend to predict that Elijah himself would literally return. John is, instead, 'the Elijah who was to come', a spiritual and prophetic parallel. Amongst other things, John and Elijah were similar in lifestyle, in being alone during much of their ministry, and in their repeated calls for repentance.

John had played his part in the development of the kingdom of heaven. He would not live to see the culmination of Jesus' ministry, and we have no way of knowing whether he knew what was coming. It is in this sense that Jesus refers to subsequent generations of believers as 'greater' than John. John himself, of course, fulfilled his responsibilities faithfully to the end of his life.

God built up and revealed his kingdom to humans over the course of many centuries. His plans have always gone forward, despite the many attacks on the kingdom by faithless and violent humans. Jesus uses a graphic expression to refer to the violent attacks* on God's kingdom, which reflect the strong aversion of the worldly to the true Jesus. Faithful servants like John and Jesus himself have often had to pay a personal price, but God's kingdom (his reign) is invincible.

* Verse 12 is, unfortunately, translated ambiguously in the popular New International Version. As almost all other versions state more clearly, the verse refers to violent persons who 'lay hold of' the kingdom in an attempt either to damage it or to use it for their own selfish purposes. That is, verse 12 does not praise 'forceful men'; in fact, it condemns their actions.

The responses to John and Jesus provide insights into human nature. Jesus compares them to the attitudes of children who are never satisfied with what they get, for neither John nor the Jesus was quite what anyone was looking for. In any generation, the true gospel will contain much that clashes with human expectations. There is not a person alive whose personality and beliefs match the teachings of the gospel, for God's wisdom is far removed from ours. Jesus simply should not be judged by human standards, and neither should his faithful servants such as John.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why might John have needed re-assurance? Should we criticize John for this, or sympathize with him? What parallel situations might we experience? What kinds of expectations of John might the people have had? What did it mean that he was 'the Elijah who was to come'? What is the point of Jesus' comments about the kingdom of heaven? What do the responses to Jesus and John teach us?

The Spiritual Peril Of The Unrepentant (Matthew 11:20-24)

Jesus then addresses the spiritual hardness and lack of repentance that he has often faced, even in places where he has done numerous miracles. Along with the privilege of seeing Jesus at work comes the responsibility of heeding his message and his call. Jesus' warning also serves as a reminder that a lack of faith comes from a hardened heart, not a lack of reasons for faith.

Although the many miracles performed by Jesus were important demonstrations both of his compassion and of his divine authority, he expressed concern because they did not produce widespread repentance* (11:20-24). Most of those who witnessed the miracles made little effort to understand their implications, to consider the power behind them, or to ponder the identity of the man who did them. Miracles alone do not produce faith. Many skeptics claim that they would willingly believe in God if they saw a miracle, but such persons are deceiving themselves.

* The word translated 'repent' is μετανοεω ("metanoeo"), which means to change one's mind, change one's heart, or change one's direction. It refers to one's focus, perspective, or attitude, rather than to actions. While humans may well be able to 'prove their repentance by their deeds' (Acts 26:20), repentance in itself does not refer to action. It refers to the inner change that precedes any actions that may be appropriate.

In his condemnations, Jesus specifically mentions Bethsaida, Capernaum, and Korazin*. These and other cities in the region were the sites of many of the miracles performed by Jesus. But this was not an indication of their merit. Rather, it gave their residents the responsibility of responding appropriately. On the day of judgment, any unbelieving residents of these cities will have particular cause to reproach themselves for their indifference and unbelief**.

* Korazin (or Chorazin) was a town a couple of miles from Capernaum. It is mentioned in the Scriptures only here and in the parallel passage in Luke 10. Bethsaida and Capernaum are mentioned frequently in the New Testament.

** It is in this sense that Jesus said it would be 'more bearable' for ungodly cities. It does not imply any exemption or mitigation for cities or individuals that did not see Jesus and/or did not see any miracles. Witnessing a miracle does not in itself produce faith, and it is not necessary for faith.

Jesus reproaches these cities not for failing to praise or recognize the miracles, but because they did not repent and follow him in reply. Repentance is the crucial response that Jesus seeks. He is not interested in outward actions alone, however 'good' they may be. To have a genuine relationship with God, we must repent, acknowledge our burden of sin, and call on Jesus to heal us. Jesus' warnings were not only for his original hearers, but also for today's Christians. Repentance and humility are necessary conditions for the kind of faith that Jesus seeks.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is Jesus so vehement in his denunciation of these cities? How could they have witnessed miracles and not have had a change of heart? Are there parallels or lessons for us? Why is repentance so important to Jesus?

Rest For The Soul (Matthew 11:25-30)

As familiar as these verses may be, they contain some profound insights into Jesus' perspectives and priorities. The rest that he offers is a different and more precious form of rest than the things

that the world would call 'rest'. To appreciate and experience the spiritual rest that Jesus offers, we must respond to him with humility, faith, and perseverance.

Jesus addresses his Father directly, and comments upon how God has chosen to reveal the greatest spiritual truths to 'little children' (11:25-27). This is a figurative way of saying that only the humble, penitent, and contrite can understand the most important aspects of Christianity. The essence of Christianity is that Jesus shed his blood so that those who believed in him could have their sins forgiven. Good works, morality, ministry, and everything else in Christianity must always be kept in their proper place, secondary to the central message of grace and mercy by the blood of Jesus. Only to a spiritual 'child' will this make sense.

Spiritual truths are hidden from the wise and learned, but not by God's doing, for God loves all humans equally. But the learned, the powerful, the famous, the wealthy, and the popular often hide the truths of God from their own minds. Their own worldly successes, abilities, and advantages condition them to love this world, and thus to reject the most important teachings of God. They often do this unconsciously, since they simply do not want to accept the inevitable end of their lives here and the inevitable loss of all that they possess here. Thus they run the danger of 'falling away' when they come face-to-face with the true Jesus.

God has committed everything of importance to Jesus, so only by understanding Jesus can we understand God. "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). Many things taught about Christianity are actually alien to the true nature of the gospel, for humans too readily accept without question the perspectives and priorities of this world. If we put our faith and hope in this world, we can't have real faith and hope in Jesus. But if and when we see everything else through Jesus, then we can see things much more clearly.

Few Scriptures are as encouraging to the world-weary soul as Jesus' call for us to come to him for rest (11:28-30). Life in this world is indeed weary and burdensome. For the faithful believer, it will always be thus, for we cannot help noticing the sadness, injustice, fear, and helplessness around us. Those who want to be 'happy' all of the time fail to realize that this is only possible if we willfully ignore and deny all of the sorrows and horrors around us.

Jesus offers something greater than a physical rest. As long as we live in this world, our bodies, hearts, and minds will be taxed and wearied. Only in God's eternal house shall we tire no more physically, yet we can find relief now for our souls. We can stop striving and plotting for worldly treasure, for we have greater and lasting eternal treasure awaiting us. We can cease our self-justifications and rationalizations, for Jesus forgives our sins freely and completely. We no longer need to wander aimlessly through life, for Jesus gives us a vital and glorious purpose.

Jesus speaks of accepting his 'yoke'* because this kind of rest can only be found when we follow him from the heart. This is not a restrictive 'rule'; it is not the case that Jesus will refuse us rest if we do not do as he wishes. Rather, it is a profound truth. There simply is no rest anywhere else, not in the world and not in human-made religion or philosophy. Only Jesus is truly gentle with us, confronting our erroneous beliefs and sinful practices but not damaging our tender souls. Only Jesus is truly humble in heart, for only he demonstrated his love by such extreme sacrifices.

* Some commentators make labored attempts to establish an elaborate parallel with some specific kind of yoke as used with farm animals, so as to define in what specific ways we must be submissive to Jesus. But this kind of over-analysis misses the point. Jesus' figure of speech simply means that we must follow him on his terms, whatever those may be.

Centering our faith on Jesus seems like a simple concept, yet very few do it. Jesus' nature and perspective are far different from anything taught in the world, and even most 'Christian' fellowships simply adapt Jesus to make him fit comfortably into their worldly beliefs. The gospel accounts leave no doubt, though, as to his extraordinary nature and his unforgettable ministry. If we simply follow him as he really is, then he can truly give us rest for our souls.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does Jesus mean here by 'little children'? What qualities of children is he praising? Should we have all the qualities of children? What spiritual principles are often hidden from those blessed by earthly standards? Why do we so quickly accept the world's perspectives and priorities? What kind of 'yoke' does Jesus call us to accept? What kind of 'rest' can we hope for?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2007

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Ten: My Servant Whom I Have Chosen (Matthew 12)

The very nature of Jesus' ministry arouses the opposition of those who seek their treasure in this world. Yet the genuine message of Jesus is also vastly different from any human-made religion. For this reason, even those who consider themselves to be religious often find it difficult and humbling to accept the genuine Jesus as God's only chosen Servant and Messiah.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus brought a new perspective on everything of importance, divine power and authority over every force in this world, and a new set of priorities as illustrated in the things he did (Matthew 5:1-9:34). He sends his followers into the world like sheep among wolves (9:35-10:42).

Jesus' ministry is hard for the world to accept, and he considered blessed those who do not fall away from him when they grasp his true nature (Matthew 11). Even John the Baptist, the messenger or Elijah who was to come, needed re-assurance due to the persecution he suffered. Jesus reminded him of the nature of his ministry to the weak and poor, and told us also of the kingdom of heaven. Those who saw Jesus at work and did not repent faced spiritual peril. Miracles alone do not produce repentance, which is the crucial response that Jesus looks for.

Jesus offers us rest for the soul. We must acknowledge our spiritual sickness, poverty, and childlikeness for him to be able to reveal important spiritual truths to us. He calls us simply to come to him, without excuse or reservation, and to accept the gentle yoke of his Lordship. He then gives us a spiritual rest that transcends any pleasure or relaxation to be found in this world.

Son, Lord, & Servant (Matthew 12:1-21)

As interest in Jesus' ministry grew, so did opposition. Here we see that the sharpest opposition came from those who considered themselves to be religious leaders. Since Jesus did not fit their preconceptions about the Messiah, they were unwilling to accept Jesus for who he was. Likewise, our own preconceptions about Jesus can make it harder to see and love the real Jesus.

Jesus, the Son of Man, is also Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-8). The Pharisees thought they had found an indisputable charge: their 'gotcha' consists of Jesus' disciples picking heads of grain on the Sabbath. While this hardly violated any of God's commands regarding the Sabbath*, it did break a rule that the Pharisees themselves had instituted. They wrongly accused the disciples because their own rules** were more important to them than what God himself actually had said.

* The actual Sabbath commands in Scripture are quite simple, merely prohibiting 'work'. God's intention was to ensure that his people refrained from their usual occupations and pursuits for one day. This was as much for the people's benefit as for the importance of worshiping God. Because the Pharisees and many other Jews found this command too vague, they gradually developed their own rules to 'clarify' God's.

** In fact, many of the rules originated as mere guidelines or suggestions, and many of them had probably at one time been useful. But with usage over time, they hardened into ironclad rules, so that many of the Jews were no longer conscious of any distinction between God's commands and human-made rules.

Jesus answers with a counter-example from Scripture, describing a situation (from 1 Samuel 21) in which David and others ate consecrated bread reserved for priests. To show that 'work' does not refer to physical exertion in itself, but to activities done in pursuit of personal gain, Jesus reminds them that the priests did not cease making their usual sacrifices and performing their usual functions on Sabbath days. Many of these actions required considerable physical effort.

Jesus once more quotes Hosea's statement* that God desires mercy rather than sacrifice. The Pharisees' problem is not the rules themselves, but the perspective that caused them to rely on rules and to value the rules for their own sake. God wishes our relationship with him to be based on mercy and grace, because he knows that only thus can he have the kind of relationship with us that he desires. For centuries, he had needed to make do with a relationship with his people defined by sacrifice and law, but this was temporary and was never an optimal arrangement.

* From Hosea 6:6, which Jesus had also quoted in Matthew 9:13. Note that Hosea's statement refers to the basis of our relationship with God, not to our actions. Trying to justify ourselves by being merciful is just as hopeless as trying to justify ourselves through sacrifices. God wants his mercy to be the foundation of our relationship with him.

Thus there is no reason at all to condemn someone for doing good on the Sabbath (12:9-14). These Pharisees had already decided to reject and oppose Jesus, and they were looking for any pretext to discredit him. (See also the next section, when this attitude becomes even worse.) Because of their bad motivations, their priorities were completely wrong. It should be obvious that even a sheep that encounters danger on the Sabbath should be helped. To confirm this, Jesus deliberately makes use of an opportunity to heal a man's hand on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees are still unable to accept that the healing is more important than their own arbitrary rules.

The prophecy from Isaiah 42 that Matthew quotes here (12:15-21) describes another significant aspect of Jesus' nature. He is God's chosen servant*, and thus he exemplifies exactly what God wants his servant to be. No human committee or group of voters or authorities chose this servant; God alone chose Jesus and made him exactly what he wanted him to be. As before, Jesus calls us blessed if we do not fall away when we see who the Messiah really is.

* There are many references to 'the servant' in Isaiah. In Isaiah, 'the servant' is a personification of God's ideal servant, which can be applied to ancient Israel, to Israel's kings and leaders when faithful, and to God's people in general. The image of the servant finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, and thus it is generally understood that we are meant to apply the 'servant' passages to Jesus most of all.

The chosen servant's nature is humble and self-sacrificing above all. He does not demand attention or privilege, and he deals gently with the weak. The images of the bruised reed and the smoldering wick remind us that Jesus values and treats tenderly even those whom the world would consider to be worthless or unimportant. Only with those who erroneously think themselves strong and healthy does Jesus become stern.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why did the Pharisees try to accuse Jesus? What was the root of their error? What does Jesus mean by being 'Lord of the Sabbath'? How does this affect us? What does this incident tell us about Jesus priorities? Why does Matthew quote Isaiah 42 here? What does this passage tell us about Jesus?

A Serious Spiritual Malady (Matthew 12:22-37)

Once again, an act of compassion by Jesus arouses the ire of the Pharisees, who repeat their earlier accusation that Jesus' apparent healing power must come from a demonic source. First Jesus explains how irrational this accusation is, and then he goes on to point out the deeper spiritual sickness that afflicts the Pharisees and others of their mindset.

Because of their hardened opposition to Jesus, the Pharisees respond to his compassion with an accusation (12:22-32). As the people praised Jesus as the Son of David, the Pharisees accused him of being a disciple of Beelzebub* who got miraculous power from demonic sources. Jesus explains, using parables and analogies, that this would be impossible. Demons are not going to drive out other demons, nor is Satan going to relieve the suffering he himself has inflicted.

* Beelzebub is one of many ancient names for Satan. It literally means 'lord of the flies', a graphic and appropriate image.

The kingdom of God has truly come upon those who saw what Jesus did, and yet the Pharisees could respond only by attacking and blaspheming it. Their stubbornness and hardness of heart caused them not only to reject the most emphatic displays of spiritual power and compassion, but even to ascribe them to Satan. It is for this bizarre and wildly improper allegation that Jesus convicts them of blaspheming (speaking harshly against) the Holy Spirit*.

* The meaning of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" does not need to be obscure. Note that, in verse 32, Jesus uses the even more straightforward 'speak against the Holy Spirit'. That is, after all, what blasphemy means, and there is no reason in the text to make it any more complicated than that. Jesus implies that only someone with an irrevocably hardened heart would do such a thing. Many believers worry that they may have committed this sin, in part because of the unnecessarily convoluted ways that the verse has been taught. There is, though, no need for any faithful Christian to worry about being in this sad condition.

Jesus indicates that blasphemy against the Spirit is even more spiritually disastrous* than blasphemy against Jesus or against God the Father. Although none of the gospels explain why this is so, we do know that the Spirit's ministry involves the most direct contact between God and his people. The Spirit's ministry is thus the most intimate and the most directly fruitful. The work of the Spirit is almost universally appreciated, even by those whose faith is weak. In any case, Jesus and his Father have considerable love and appreciation for the Spirit and his work.

* Many readers become very nervous upon reading Jesus' statement that this sin 'will never be forgiven'. This is an example of how any individual verse must be interpreted in view of the Scriptures as a whole. There is no individual sin that cannot be forgiven. As in passages such as Matthew 5:29-30 and 18:6-9, Jesus here engages in hyperbole in order to emphasize the serious nature of these Pharisees' sinfulness. See also the next few verses, in which Jesus elaborates on their spiritual condition. Verse 37 is another example of this same type of hyperbole.

This illustrates a principle involving the tongue and the heart (12:33-37). Jesus frequently points out that, just as a tree and its fruit match, our beliefs inevitably influence our words (and actions). The Pharisees were not merely guilty of a slip of the tongue or an inaccurate statement. Their hateful comments about Jesus' miracles were the overflow of hard, jealous hearts. Their careless words were merely outward evidence of what was happening inside them. Jesus also indicates (verse 37) that careless words may serve as a warning to us of our spiritual condition*.

* Here again Jesus exaggerates to emphasize his point. Our words in themselves will not, of course, be the standard of judgment.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why were the Pharisees determined to discredit Jesus' miracles? What was their spiritual condition? Why did Jesus say that their blasphemy was against the Spirit? Why do many believers have difficulty understanding this verse? What should we learn from Jesus' warnings about our words and what they reveal? Why is Jesus so concerned about our words?

Establishing A Relationship With Jesus (Matthew 12:38-50)

The incidents described in these verses illustrate the right way and the wrong way to establish a relationship with God's chosen Messiah. Although Jesus freely used his miraculous power when it was appropriate, he refused to indulge those who wanted to see miracles for miracles' sake. He also teaches us that spiritual relationships are more important than earthly ties.

Jesus must first contend with a 'we want a miracle' attitude (12:38-42). The Pharisees try once again to best Jesus. It is uncertain whether they hoped that Jesus would do something inappropriate, or whether they thought he might not be up to their challenge. In either case, their efforts are once again refuted. Jesus will not do miracles for miracles' sake. God's power is not to be used for amusement or entertainment, but only to illustrate his compassion and his truth.

Only one miracle will be given as proof of who Jesus was: the resurrection. Jesus refers to this as 'the sign of Jonah', comparing Jonah's three days inside the fish with the three days between Jesus' death and his resurrection. It is in one sense an odd analogy, since Jonah is hardly an ideal example to emulate. Yet Jesus did become a 'Jonah' in a sense, because he took upon himself the sins of the world. Jonah suffered for his own sins, but Jesus suffered for the sins of others.

Jesus' all-atoning death and death-conquering resurrection were both miraculous beyond anything else that even Jesus himself did. Thus, seeking further miracles is hardly an appropriate way to develop a relationship with Jesus.

Likewise, Jesus' parable about the 'unoccupied soul' (12:43-45) illustrates another wrong way to seek God. This individual takes a good first step, as the evil spirit is ejected from within him. But he never fills its place with anything positive. Instead of filling himself with Jesus and the Spirit, his soul remains an empty place and a missed opportunity. Indeed, this person ends up worse off at the end, when a whole group of evil spirits comes back.

This illustrates that developing faith in Jesus is two-fold. We must lose our faith in everything of this world, whether it is in human leaders, material things, pleasures, popularity, or anything else.

And we must allow Jesus to fill our hearts and souls. If we just clear out some space inside us and then make a little effort to get to know him better, he will bless us with deeper faith.

Jesus uses a visit from his mother and his brothers to teach us a positive way to seek him (12:46-50). When his family came for him*, they were unable or unwilling to get through the crowd, so word was sent in to Jesus. He thus compares his human family with his spiritual family. The latter, which consists of those who seek, know, honor, and obey his Father, is the more important of the two. To be called a brother or sister of Jesus is wonderfully assuring, and we thus ought to take heed of the means by which we can be given such a desirable designation.

* Mark 3:21 indicates that they had come to 'take charge of him', fearing for his mental stability. Although his family later became believers, at this time they seem entirely to have misunderstood what he was doing.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why might the Pharisees have wanted a miracle? Why wouldn't Jesus give them one? What was different about their request and the many other requests that he accommodated? What does Jesus want us to learn from the parable of the man and the evil spirits? In what sense are we Jesus' family if we do God's will?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2007*

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Eleven: The Kingdom Of Heaven Is Like . . . (Matthew 13:1-52)

The kingdom of heaven is like nothing at all on this earth. In this well-known series of parables, Jesus illustrates several aspects of the kingdom, to help us to appreciate its unusual nature and its surpassing importance. Jesus wants his followers to pull their focus off of themselves and off of everything in this world, so that they can seek and experience a kingdom that truly matters.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus called his followers to go out into the world like sheep among wolves (Matthew 9:35-10:42). Knowing that his nature and his ministry are contrary to all fleshly expectations, we are blessed if we do not fall away from him when we realize who Jesus truly is (Matthew 11).

Jesus is the Messiah, the special Servant whom God himself has chosen (Matthew 12). He is Son of Man, Lord of the Sabbath, the chosen Servant, and more. To the Pharisees who were fixated on obeying rules of their own making, he taught that God wanted us to seek him by his mercy, not our sacrifices. Doing good on the Sabbath is thus always lawful. The Pharisees were so ill spiritually that they accused Jesus of performing compassionate healings with the aid of demonic power. This type of blasphemy against the Spirit (which only someone very hardened would do) is a particularly serious sin.

Establishing a relationship with Jesus must be done on his terms. The Pharisees demanded that he perform a miracle especially for them, only to be told that the 'sign of Jonah', Jesus' coming death and resurrection, was sufficient for them. He told the parable of the unoccupied soul to urge his hearers to clear their minds and hearts of worldly things, and to allow Jesus to fill them up. He will claim as his mothers, sisters, and brothers those who honor and do his Father's will.

The Indiscriminate Sower (Matthew 13:1-23)

This familiar parable exemplifies an amazing aspect of God's nature. No earthly farmer would waste most of his seed on soil that would obviously be unproductive, yet God sows his Word and his blessings throughout the world without favoritism or bias. When we focus our attention on the sower, rather than on the soils, we can appreciate even more fully what Jesus tells us.

In parable of the sower (13:1-9), Jesus describes a sight that his audience would have found quite familiar and commonplace, that of a farmer scattering his seed. Yet this farmer behaves in an unfamiliar fashion, for instead of sowing seed only in areas carefully prepared for planting, he throws it in every direction, both in suitable soil and in unsuitable.

Although there are many ways to study the parables, filled as they are with potential applications, it is a good idea to identify first of all the main point. With some parables, this is relatively obvious, but with other parables, the wealth of detail makes it less simple. It is important to remember that the parables are not allegories*, and thus the interpretation that Jesus intended will generally be fairly simple, but spiritually powerful.

* In an allegory, every detail has an exact parallel in the intended interpretation. Indeed, the point of an allegory is to use the figurative parallel as an alternate way of telling a complete story. In the parables, on the other hand, details are generally added more for the purpose of making the story more vivid or more

memorable. The details often do have their own parallel meanings, as is the case with the parable of the sower. But the details in themselves are usually of lesser importance.

Jesus' disciples quite naturally and reasonably ask him why he speaks so frequently in parables (13:10-17). When Jesus refers to the 'secrets of the kingdom of heaven', he does not mean obscure facts that are obtainable only by a chosen few. Rather, Jesus is well aware of the sharp contrast between the human perspective and the heavenly perspective. These 'secrets' are the many ways that the nature of the kingdom of heaven differs from anything in this world.

Humans so often hear without understanding. Even when they master the facts of a situation, their earthly priorities and mortal perspectives can still make them completely blind to spiritual truth. To those who do seek truth, parables are a means of helping us change our thinking patterns. They force a reader or listener to ask questions and to consider how everyday situations illustrate spiritual principles. On the other hand, to those whose minds are closed about spiritual matters, neither a straightforward explanation nor a figure of speech will change their hearts.

Jesus' generation was blessed to hear the proclamation of many long-awaited truths about the kingdom. All of the great prophets and patriarchs of the past had seen only a portion of the picture. Jesus' listeners - and we as well - have no excuse for not making a sincere effort to allow Jesus to explain what the kingdom of heaven is truly like.

After his general comments on the parables, Jesus explains the parable of the sower (13:18-23). Seed makes an appropriate metaphor for the message of the kingdom or the Word of God*, since seed by its very nature gives both growth and life. The various soils - hard, rocky, thorny, and good - also form a convincing parallel for the most common responses to God's Word. Only when it comes to the emphasis of the parable is it necessary to use some care.

* In most biblical cases and contexts, 'the word' or the 'Word of God' (or, the 'message') includes, but is not limited to, the written Scriptures.

Though it is natural to focus on the soils, since they represent ourselves, it is really the sower, God, who merits the main emphasis. While each of the soils acts in the parable exactly as it would in 'real life', the sower does not. Indeed, from an everyday perspective his behavior is irrational. But God, in the hope of a good crop, scatters seed everywhere on earth, knowing that most of it will be 'wasted'. God's abundant grace is easily sufficient for us all, and in his compassionate forbearance, he endures seeing his seed - and Jesus' blood - ignored and rejected.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What general ideas should we keep in mind when studying the parables? How did Jesus intend for us to respond to them? How do they build our faith in Jesus? What does this parable teach us about God? What does it teach us about Jesus? How much importance should we give to the various soils?

Weeds, Seeds, & More (Matthew 13:24-43)

Jesus now tells several more parables that illustrate other important aspects of the kingdom of heaven. Besides being full of mercy and grace, God is also extraordinarily patient. He can also take a minuscule amount of faith in someone, and nurture it until it becomes a much greater blessing. And his Word is living and active, spreading wherever it is allowed to go.

Jesus' parable of the weeds (13:24-30) illustrates another remarkable aspect of God's nature. The parable describes a hard-working farmer whose field full of good seed is vandalized by an

enemy, with the result that good wheat and worthless weeds* are now closely mixed together. The patient farmer admonishes his servants not to try to root up the weeds, but to wait and sort everything out at harvest time.

* Because the Greek word translated as 'weeds' is a rather specific term, some commentators have attempted to read further details into the parable. Most often, they want to assume that the weeds were of a kind nearly indistinguishable from wheat. But note that this is not the reason given by the farmer for not rooting up the weeds - instead, because the plants are so closely mixed together, he fears that pulling up the weeds will accidentally damage or uproot some of the good wheat.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast illustrate two more aspects of God's kingdom (13:31-35). Just as a tiny mustard seed* grows into a large plant, God can take the smallest amount of faith or hope and make it grow beyond any of our expectations. This is true literally, for God created the mustard seed with its amazing potential for growth. Figuratively (or spiritually), it is also God who grants the possibility of life and growth. The focus here is not on ourselves, on the faith that we do or do not have, or on the goals that we may hope God to fulfill. Instead, we should focus on the God of life and growth, who is able to work his will in us.

* In the parallel passage in Mark (Mark 4:30-32), Jesus' words are translated in such a way that he refers to the mustard seed as 'the smallest seed you plant in the ground'. Some commentators have stated that there were even smaller seeds known at the time, but this is not really the point that Jesus is making. The mustard seed is quite small, and it was often used as a symbol of smallness in Jesus' time. Yet it produces a plant that can grow to nearly ten feet in height. Then too, the extent of growth is not that much more miraculous than is the process of growth itself.

Likewise, the simple parable of the yeast in the dough reminds us, in a different way, of how powerfully God's Word can spread. It takes only a small amount of yeast to spread through an entire batch of dough, and even a small amount of God's Word or will can have amazing effects.

After these parables, Jesus goes back and explains the parable of the weeds (13:36-43). Matching most of the details is relatively easy to grasp, although it may cause mild surprise to learn that the servants in the parable represent actual angels, not merely human servants of God.

This parable illustrates first of all God's amazing patience and forbearance, in that he allows the vast majority of humans to continue living as useless 'weeds', so that he will not take away the opportunity for anyone to turn to him*. Though we may at times feel as the servants do, desirous of removing the weeds at once, we must remember that at one time we too taxed God's patience as we came to an awareness of our sinfulness and of our need to turn to Jesus.

* Notice that this is an example of why the details in a parable cannot be pressed too literally. The weeds in the parable will always be weeds, but God is so patient with 'weed' souls precisely because they may some day repent and turn to him.

Yet the parable also speaks openly about the end of the age as an established fact of the future. The weeds do face certain destruction at harvest time, and the wheat will someday be free of the choking, crowding influence of the weeds. God's extraordinary patience co-exists with the absolute righteousness of his character. We must always remember both sides of God's nature.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is a farmer an appropriate symbol for God? Why are wheat and weeds appropriate images? What is the main lesson of the parable of each parable in this section? Are these parables different illustrations of the same point or points, or do they teach different lessons?

A Kingdom Of Incalculable Value (Matthew 13:44-52)

The kingdom of heaven cannot be compared with the kingdoms or treasures of this world. Its value transcends not only the worth of any earthly fortune, but even any scale that we could invent to measure wealth or riches. The kingdom is of a unique and special nature that we can only partially appreciate now. But even this partial understanding gives us a glimpse of its glory.

The short parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl teach similar lessons (13:44-46). Both portray an individual finding an item that he at once recognizes to be special, something for which it is worth sacrificing everything else. In both cases, it is easy to understand the response of these persons, for they knew that they had found something of extraordinary value. But it is more difficult to appreciate just how much more valuable the kingdom of heaven is than any worldly treasure.

These parables remind us that we should learn to value the right things. In the parables, no one had to tell these men to sell everything else to acquire the field or the pearl. If we try to force ourselves to sacrifice grudgingly for the sake of God's kingdom, then we are on the wrong track. Instead, we should strive to appreciate God and Jesus, for then our response can follow unforced.

The final parable in this amazing series concerns a net full of fish (13:47-50). Once more, this was a familiar sight to Jesus' audience, for they were used to seeing fishermen haul in a large net and then sort out the worthwhile (edible) fish from those that were useless to humans. This time Jesus puts the full emphasis on the certainty of final judgment. The reality of Judgment Day is an essential aspect of the kingdom, and it must be part of our consciousness if we wish to follow Jesus and to understand what he teaches us.

Finally, Jesus tells another very short parable to help us understand the kingdom's spiritual richness (13:51-52). He has his listeners imagine a vast storeroom filled with all kinds of valuable goods, both new and old, yet this merely hints at the glory and complexity of God's kingdom. Jesus promises us that, if we listen to his teaching and learn about the kingdom of heaven, then we shall have such a storehouse of treasure in our own minds and hearts. Learning about God's kingdom and understanding its realities is a most rewarding pursuit.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How can we learn to recognize the kingdom of God as a pearl or a treasure? What is the main point of these two parables? Why does Jesus compare the kingdom to a net full of fish? How should we respond to this parable? How is the kingdom like a storeroom? What do these parables tell us about Jesus himself?

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TO FULFILL WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW

Notes For Week Twelve: Peaks & Valleys (Matthew 13:53-14:36)

Jesus' ministry on this earth was often misunderstood, often unappreciated, and often misjudged. There were moments when Jesus did or said something so extraordinary that everyone had to take notice, yet there were many times when the world disregarded him, his ministry, and his followers. Even his own disciples constantly battled their own spiritual limitations.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus called blessed those who do not fall away from him when they learn the truth about his nature and his ministry (Matthew 11). Jesus is the servant whom God himself has chosen, the one and only Messiah (Matthew 12). We must therefore accept Jesus as he truly is, or not at all.

Jesus taught a series of parables to describe what the kingdom of heaven is like, and to illustrate how different it is from our human expectations (Matthew 13:1-52). His parable about the indiscriminate sower illustrates how the parables use everyday situations to make us think about spiritual truths. The parable in particular illustrates God's abundant grace, as the farmer spreads his good seed everywhere, giving every soil a chance.

Additional parables use weeds, seeds, and other familiar objects. The parable of the wheat and the weeds demonstrates God's patience in bearing with the 'weeds' for the sake of the good crop. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast remind us that God and his Word produce life and growth, and that they can spread and permeate wherever they are allowed to go. God's kingdom is of incalculable value, as illustrated by the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl. The net parable teaches us the inevitability of judgment, while the brief storeroom parable encourages us to learn about the kingdom and thus store up treasure in our minds and souls.

Prophets Without Honor (Matthew 13:53-14:12)

Jesus and his messenger John made an extraordinary pair. Together they brought good news that completely fulfilled God's plans and that completely met humanity's spiritual needs. Yet the world had little understanding of either. Those who could have known Jesus best denigrated him and his ministry. John ran afoul of a typical human ruler who pitilessly struck him down.

When Jesus returns to his hometown* (13:53-58), the reception is hardly enthusiastic. Instead of the hero's welcome that an athlete or entertainer may have received, the people are amazed at Jesus - but not in a positive way. They cannot believe that one of their own neighbors is doing such unexpected things**. Their fleshly familiarity with Jesus prevents them from taking him seriously. They are actually annoyed and offended that he has become a spiritual teacher.

* Nazareth, where Jesus had grown up. Neither Matthew nor Mark (in Mark 6) actually specifies whether it was Nazareth or Capernaum, where Jesus had relocated when he began his public ministry. But the gospels tell us of previous visits to Capernaum during which Jesus had done miracles. Luke 4:14-30 describes Jesus' last time in Nazareth, which occurred right at the start of his public ministry.

** Note that this tells us that Jesus had never previously done miraculous signs in his hometown. Everyone there still thinks of him strictly in terms of his family and profession.

Jesus comments that, for a prophet, it is in his hometown that he can actually expect the least amount of respect and honor. Prophets of the truth must expect not ever to be particularly popular, even by those who know them well. To others, they are at least curiosities for a while. But with those who already know them, the attention and acclaim that would be given to a more worldly kind of celebrity can be replaced with criticism and resentment.

We learn next of the death of the faithful servant John the Baptist, who also was a prophet in his way (14:1-12). Reports about Jesus' ministry and miracles have become intertwined with rumors that the (now) late John has come back from the dead. For, in fact, John has been executed since we last saw him (in Matthew 11). Both John's imprisonment and his execution came by the command of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee*.

* At the death of Herod 'The Great' in 4 BC, his three surviving sons divided his kingdom under an arrangement approved by Augustus Caesar. Archelaus was given the main portion of the kingdom and was granted the title of ethnarch. The other two brothers, Antipas and Philip, received smaller portions and were given the title tetrarch. Herod Antipas's portion consisted of Galilee and Perea.

The parallel account in Mark (Mark 6:14-29) tells us that Herod respected John and found his teachings interesting, if difficult to grasp. But when Herod divorced his first wife so that he could marry his niece Herodias (who had previously been married to Herod's half-brother Philip; not to be confused with his brother and fellow tetrarch Philip), John's integrity left him no choice but to tell the king that the marriage was unlawful*. The vengeful Herodias provoked Herod to have John imprisoned, and she continued to look for an opportunity to have him executed.

* Because the first wife of Herod Antipas was the daughter of the king of Arabia, the divorce also involved Herod in some diplomatic difficulties.

Herodias finally got her revenge at a lavish birthday party for Herod. Her daughter Salome's* dancing pleased the king so much that he foolishly swore to give the young woman whatever she asked for. When Herodias induced her to ask for John's head on a platter, Herod was placed in a disagreeable though not impossible position. This pathetic, weak-willed ruler chose to have John executed, preferring to have an innocent man killed rather than suffer a little well-deserved embarrassment.

* Her name is known from secular history; the Scriptures refer to her only as the daughter of Herodias.

These two events remind us of the sad treatment that God's most faithful servants often find in this world. Those who have power, wealth, or popularity in this world hate to hear the truth, because it calls them to give up their special privileges and their opportunities to exploit others.

Meanwhile, those who are harassed and helpless too often ignore the truth, because they are short-sighted. Instead of trusting in Jesus and learning from him, they hope to find help from among the same ruling classes who exploit and oppress them, and they will not accept a humble, selfless Savior like the true Jesus of the gospels.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why did the residents of Jesus' hometown have so little faith? Did they just have no faith in him, or was there something wrong with their relationship with God? What similar examples to this might we see? Why was Herodias so vengeful against John? Why did Herod agree to have John executed? What other choices did he have? What should we learn from this incident?

A Compassionate Miracle (Matthew 14:13-21)

Jesus' compassionate use of his miraculous abilities reaches a peak in this episode. After yet another time of teaching and healing, Jesus must contend with a consequence of the vast interest he has aroused. In feeding the five thousand, Jesus performed one of his most amazing miracles, while at the same time displaying his compassion for lost, suffering humanity on a grand scale.

The miracle arises out of an unusual situation (14:13-17). On receiving the news of John's death, Jesus hopes to find some solitude and thus travels to a remote location. But the inevitable crowds gather, and soon he is once again healing and teaching despite his own grief. As evening approaches, it becomes evident that there will be a problem with feeding the crowd, and the disciples want to have them disperse at once. But Jesus already has a plan in mind. Wanting to see his disciples' reaction (see, for example, John 6:5-6), Jesus tells them to feed the crowds.

The feeding of the five thousand (14:18-21) is one of Jesus' best-remembered miracles*. Asked to feed the crowd, the disciples amass the grand total of five loaves and two fish. Yet this is more than enough for Jesus. He takes the small supply of food, and in a very orderly fashion he breaks off piece after piece to be distributed to the crowd. There is such bounty that afterwards his disciples gather up twelve basketfuls of leftover pieces.

* The account of the feeding of the five thousand is recorded in all four of the inspired gospel accounts, making it one of a very small number of events in Jesus' life prior to his arrest and trial to be recorded by all four inspired writers.

Besides the kinds of lessons taught by Jesus' other miracles, this one leaves us with a memorable picture of Jesus feeding, nourishing, and caring for his sheep. His mastery over the physical world is combined with his compassion and selflessness.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it show us that Jesus wanted to be alone after hearing of John's death? Why did the crowds seek him out anyway? What does his response tell us? Why does he tell the disciples to feed the crowds? What does the miracle tell us about Jesus?

An Unusual Miracle (Matthew 14:22-36)

The miracle described in this passage is rather different from most of Jesus' other miracles. In walking on the water to meet up with his disciples in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, it might seem at first that Jesus is simply using his divine powers to suit his own personal convenience. But soon we see that this miracle served an important purpose.

Jesus' feat of walking across the waters of the lake* (14:22-27) differs in a number of ways from the miracles we have seen previously. It was not performed in response to a request, or in answer to a need that was brought to his attention. This time, Jesus performed an unprompted miracle that enabled him to observe his disciples' responses.

* Recently, some unbelievers concocted an alternate 'explanation' of this phenomenon, as they occasionally do with various miraculous events in the Scriptures. This time, these self-proclaimed 'scholars' proposed the amusing theory that Jesus was actually walking on 'a hard to see piece of ice'. Like most such attempts to discredit Scripture, this theory is far more improbable (and more dependent on coincidence) than is the Bible's explanation that it was a miracle.

After gathering up the leftovers from the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples go on ahead of Jesus, leaving him on shore while they cross the lake in a boat. Much later, in the middle of the night and with a strong wind blowing, Jesus performs his unexpected miracle, walking right across the surface of the lake. Thinking that they are seeing a ghost, the disciples are terrified until Jesus identifies himself.

Peter then has one of his sudden bursts of enthusiasm, and he wants to try it too (13:47-50). His initial eagerness is creditable, and indeed his faith allows him to duplicate Jesus' feat for a short time. But Peter does not yet have the faith to persevere when appearances turn against him. As soon as he realizes how forcefully the wind is blowing, and realizes what he is doing, he is stricken with sudden doubts. Peter is very much like us, in that our faith can allow us to take risks and to make changes that we never could have done without Jesus. But like Peter, we too are often hit by sudden doubts that derail us.

Peter should not be criticized for what happened, nor should we when such things happen to us. Peter alone got out of the boat, and for his brief display of faith he was able to do something amazing. And he also learned some important lessons about faith. He still was far too unstable to maintain his faith through periods of trial, yet he had experienced what is possible with faith. Jesus, of course, already knew what was in Peter's heart, but now Peter knows it and can learn from it.

The disciples are naturally overawed by the whole experience of events. Indeed, at this point in their relationship with Jesus, they are frequently overwhelmed by the things Jesus does and says. As for Jesus, he has given them some things to think about and to learn from. As soon as the boat lands at Gennesaret, Jesus resumes his ministry of teaching and healing, as new crowds continue to seek him out. No matter what Jesus himself went through, there were always more sheep to be cared for, and more souls to be taught.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Is it likely that Jesus planned to walk on the water, or did the situation simply arise? What reasons may he have had for doing it? Why were the disciples so afraid when they saw him? What can we learn from Peter's reaction and his experience? What do we learn about Jesus from these events?

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