



# Explore the Bible®

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



## *Matthew 1-13*

Winter 2015-16 > HCSB

*Gregg Matte, General Editor*

LifeWay | Adults

# LIFE BY DESIGN

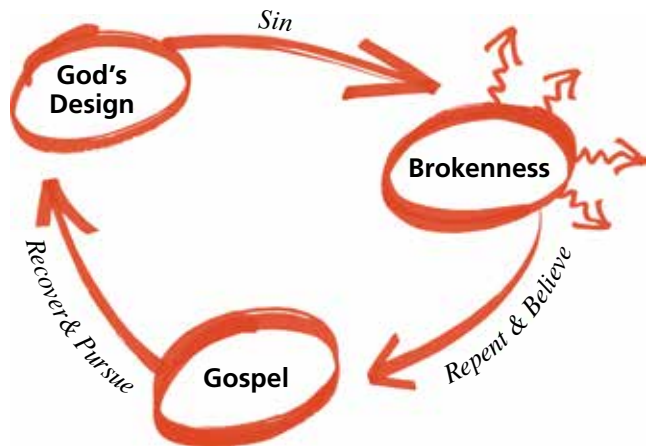
**We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.**

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

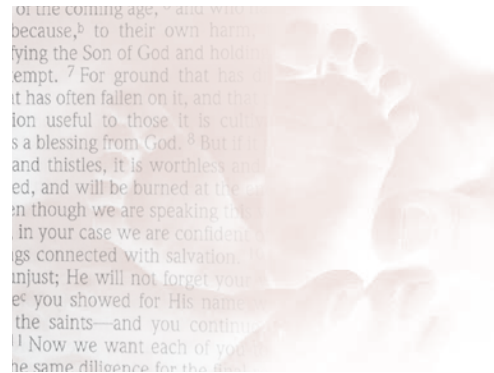
Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Excerpted from *Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel*.

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\*Sanctity of Human Life Emphasis

\*\*Evangelistic Emphasis



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## A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



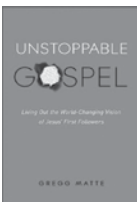
We cannot say that one book of the Bible is better than another, but I can tell you that Matthew is one of my favorites. When I became a Christian as a teenager, Matthew was the first biblical book I read. I suppose I started at the beginning of the New Testament and just kept on reading. Since that day, I have found myself journeying back to Matthew at numerous seasons of my life. Maybe it is just the simplicity of the red letters coming alive through the life of Jesus, or it may be the practicality that is so easily understood and applied in our lives. Regardless, the Book of Matthew speaks to the souls of all who read it.

As you begin this journey, keep your mind and heart open to all that God will say to you. You'll learn His ways, hear from His heart, and be inspired to walk in His steps. Studying His kingdom and reign will bring impact and peace to your life—be listening for His whisper.

I encourage you to read from the depths of your heart and grab a pen to write down the inspirations you will discover for your soul. As you make notes in these pages, God will be making notes in you. More than a document from long ago, this book has grit and glory rolled into the true story of Jesus walking our earth. As we see Him live, we have a greater understanding of how we are to live.

So let's start the journey into the good news Matthew has for us.

### **Gregg Matte**



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# WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

**Apostle** [uh PAHS uhl]—literally means “one sent forth”; in addition to the 12 disciples, Barnabas, Paul, and others were also called apostles

**Bethsaida** [beth-SAY ih duh]—town located on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee, the home of Andrew, Peter, and Philip; Jesus pronounced judgment on the city for its unbelief

**Capernaum** [kuh PUHR nay uhm]—town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee that was the home base of Jesus when He began His ministry

**Centurion** [sen TYOOR ee uhn]—a Roman officer who commanded 100 soldiers

**Chorazin** [koh RAY zin]—town located in Galilee, censured by Jesus because of the unbelief of its residents

**Herod** [HEHR uhd]—name of the line of kings ruling Palestine immediately before Christ and through the first half of the first century A.D.; Herod the Great was ruler of Judea when Jesus was born

**Immanuel/Emmanuel** [ih MAN yoo el]—personal name meaning “God with us”

**Pharisee** [FEHR uh see]—largest and most influential religious sect of Judaism during the time of Jesus; the term means “separated ones”; they followed the whole written and oral law

**Sadducee** [SAD joo see]—religious party in charge of the temple; in contrast to the Pharisees, they mainly followed the first five books of the Old Testament

**Sanhedrin** [san HEE drihn]—highest Jewish council during New Testament times, presided over by the high priest; included both Pharisees and Sadducees, though the Sadducean party dominated

**Scribe** [SKRIGHB]—an expert in copying and interpreting the law of Moses

**Sidon** [SIGH duhn]—ancient Phoenician city located on the coastal plain between the mountains of Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea

**Tyre** [TIGHR]—ancient Phoenician city located on the coastal plain between the mountains of Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea

**Zealot** [ZEHL luht]—name given to members of the extreme wing of the Pharisees; believed only God had the right to rule over the Jews

# BIBLE READING PLAN

## MONTH 1

- 1. Matthew 1:1-6
- 2. Matthew 1:7-11
- 3. Matthew 1:12-17
- 4. Matthew 3:1-6
- 5. Matthew 3:7-12
- 6. Matthew 3:13-17
- 7. Matthew 4:1-4
- 8. Matthew 4:5-7
- 9. Matthew 4:8-11
- 10. Matthew 4:12-17
- 11. Matthew 4:18-22
- 12. Matthew 4:23-25
- 13. Matthew 5:1-6
- 14. Matthew 5:7-12
- 15. Matthew 5:13-16
- 16. Matthew 5:17-20
- 17. Matthew 5:21-26
- 18. Matthew 5:27-32
- 19. Matthew 5:33-37
- 20. Matthew 1:18-25
- 21. Matthew 2:1-6
- 22. Matthew 2:7-12
- 23. Matthew 2:13-15
- 24. Matthew 2:16-18
- 25. Matthew 2:19-23
- 26. Matthew 5:38-42
- 27. Matthew 5:43-48
- 28. Matthew 6:1-4
- 29. Matthew 6:5-8
- 30. Matthew 6:9-15
- 31. Matthew 6:16-18

## MONTH 2

- 1. Matthew 6:19-24
- 2. Matthew 6:25-34
- 3. Matthew 7:1-6
- 4. Matthew 7:7-12
- 5. Matthew 7:13-14
- 6. Matthew 7:15-20
- 7. Matthew 7:21-23
- 8. Matthew 7:24-29
- 9. Matthew 8:1-4
- 10. Matthew 8:5-13
- 11. Matthew 8:14-17
- 12. Matthew 8:18-22
- 13. Matthew 8:23-27
- 14. Matthew 8:28-34
- 15. Matthew 9:1-8
- 16. Matthew 9:9-13
- 17. Matthew 9:14-17
- 18. Matthew 9:18-19,23-26
- 19. Matthew 9:20-22
- 20. Matthew 9:27-31
- 21. Matthew 9:32-34
- 22. Matthew 9:35-38
- 23. Matthew 10:1-4
- 24. Matthew 10:5-10
- 25. Matthew 10:11-15
- 26. Matthew 10:16-20
- 27. Matthew 10:21-25
- 28. Matthew 10:26-31
- 29. Matthew 10:32-36
- 30. Matthew 10:37-39
- 31. Matthew 10:40-42

## MONTH 3

- 1. Matthew 11:1-6
- 2. Matthew 11:7-15
- 3. Matthew 11:16-19
- 4. Matthew 11:20-24
- 5. Matthew 11:25-27
- 6. Matthew 11:28-30
- 7. Matthew 12:1-8
- 8. Matthew 12:9-14
- 9. Matthew 12:15-21
- 10. Matthew 12:22-24
- 11. Matthew 12:25-28
- 12. Matthew 12:29-32
- 13. Matthew 12:33-37
- 14. Matthew 12:38-42
- 15. Matthew 12:43-45
- 16. Matthew 12:46-50
- 17. Matthew 13:1-9
- 18. Matthew 13:10-12
- 19. Matthew 13:13-17
- 20. Matthew 13:18-23
- 21. Matthew 13:24-30
- 22. Matthew 13:31-33
- 23. Matthew 13:34-35
- 24. Matthew 13:36-43
- 25. Matthew 13:44-46
- 26. Matthew 13:47-50
- 27. Matthew 13:51-53
- 28. Matthew 13:54-58



# INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW

Years ago as a college student I heard about the life of a nineteenth-century Christian servant named George Müller. Soon after, I happened to come across a book about his life, *George Müller of Bristol*. If someone had not previously mentioned his name and a few things about his life, I doubt I would have given that book a second look. However, what little I had learned ignited my interest in reading a biography of Müller's life.

Mentioning in advance some of the interesting and important features of the Gospel of Matthew can serve to whet our appetite for a careful reading and diligent study of its contents. In addition, background knowledge about the book serves to furnish a context for greater appreciation and understanding of its message.

## » BACKGROUND

**Writer**—Although his identity is not disclosed within the Gospel itself, the writer historically has been identified as Matthew (also known as Levi), one of Jesus' twelve disciples. In the earliest known manuscripts his name appeared in the title. Also, the writings of many early church fathers attribute the first Gospel to Matthew.

**Date**—Gospel studies have generally agreed that Mark was the earliest of the four Gospels and that Matthew reflects knowledge of Mark. This suggests that the Matthew was written after Mark. A time in the decade of the 60s would be reasonable.

**Structure**—Matthew's witness to Jesus is unique in that it intersperses narrative sections that feature Jesus' activities with discourse or teaching sections that highlight His message. The discourses are the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), instructions to the disciples (chap. 10), parables of the kingdom (chap. 13), the character of His disciples (chap. 18), and a discourse about last things (chaps. 24–25). The narrative sections surround these teaching sections. The rotation between narrative and discourse is not absolute. Some important teachings occur in the narrative sections and some narrative about Jesus' actions can be found in some discourse sections.

**Distinctives**—The most obvious distinction about Matthew is that it is the opening book of the New Testament. As such, it is a bridge between



the Testaments. The truth of this is much deeper than its placement. The content of Matthew connects with the Old Testament through its frequent reference to events that are said to be in fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecies. Matthew's characteristic formula ("this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet") occurs in the opening chapter (1:22) and is a formula that appears repeatedly. Some have counted as many as 61 quotations from the Old Testament, about twice that of any other Gospel.

## »» KEY THEMES

Like the other Gospels, Matthew is not a chronological diary of Jesus' life and ministry. It is a witness to His mission and message. Therefore, events and teachings are arranged with the intent of bearing witness to God's good news brought by His Son. Matthew portrays Jesus as the promised Messiah and long-awaited King of Israel. In short, in Matthew Jesus is the Messiah-King.

***Kingdom of Heaven***—This Gospel emphasizes the kingdom of heaven, with Jesus as its Messiah-King. With regard to Jewish sensitivity to using the name of God, Matthew refers to the kingdom only five times as the kingdom of God, but 32 times as the kingdom of heaven.

***Gentile Interest***—Paradoxically, alongside the Jewish flavor of this Gospel that bridges the Testaments is a Gentile interest. Early in the Gospel is the record of the visit of wise men from the East. At the end of the Gospel is a commission to witness to all nations. In between is the record of Jesus' healing a centurion's servant (chap. 8), to which Jesus added the prediction, "Many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (8:11). In addition, Matthew records the curing of the daughter of a Canaanite mother (chap. 15). Only Matthew records Jesus' words about Israel being replaced by a different group (21:43).

***Last Things Interest***—While not absent from the other Gospels, Matthew's interest in eschatology, or end time events, is noteworthy. The discourse in chapters 24–25 addresses end time questions, including parables about readiness, faithfulness, and judgment in light of the expectation of the future consummation.



# OUTLINE OF MATTHEW

- I. Birth and Infancy of Jesus (1:1–2:23)
- II. Beginning of Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (3:1–4:25)
- III. Discourse One: The Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)
- IV. Jesus' First Miracles (8:1–9:34)
- V. Discourse Two: Ministry of Jesus' Disciples (9:35–10:42)
- VI. Responses to Jesus' Ministry (11:1–12:50)
- VII. Discourse Three: Parables About the Kingdom (13:1-58)
- VIII. Close of Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (14:1–16:28)
- IX. Preparing for His Death (17:1-27)
- X. Discourse Four: Character of Jesus' Disciples (18:1-35)
- XI. Jesus' Ministry on the Way to Jerusalem (19:1–20:34)
- XII. Jesus' Ministry in Jerusalem (21:1–23:39)
- XIII. Discourse Five: Olivet Discourse (24:1–25:46)
- XIV. Betrayal, Crucifixion, and Burial (26:1–27:66)
- XV. Resurrection and Commission (28:1-20)

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## Session 1

# THE WAY PREPARED

Jesus came to earth as the promised King who provides salvation for those who trust Him.

## MATTHEW 3:1-12

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Wilderness of Judea <sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” <sup>3</sup> For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight! <sup>4</sup> John himself had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were flocking to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. <sup>7</sup> When he saw many of the



Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the place of his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And don’t presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones! <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> I baptize you with water for repentance, but the One who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove His sandals. He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff He will burn up with fire that never goes out.”

*Observe the actions people took as word spread of John the Baptist’s preaching. What do these actions reveal about the spiritual needs in John’s day?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Preparing the ground for a backyard garden can be an intimidating task. Sometimes the soil is hard and packed. Weeds are prolific. This first stage of preparing the garden is the most challenging, often requiring tillers and shovels and other garden tools. Once this heavy work is done, the following stages of preparation are less daunting. The removal of weeds calls for special attention. Removing the roots of weeds is imperative, or they will quickly produce more weeds and briars. Then comes the task of preparing soil for the final stage of planting the seed or setting out the plants that will ultimately produce the flowers. The reward comes with the transformation of the ground from a hard, packed earth to a cultivated bed that produces the result of the gardener’s labors.



***What kind of preparation would be required to establish a garden at your residence? What obstacles would need to be overcome? Do you think it would be worth the effort? Explain.***

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The world into which God was about to send His Son was a moral and spiritual bramble patch. Prophets throughout the generations had warned of the results the people would face because of their refusal to repent. After the prophet Malachi, four hundred years passed without a prophetic voice in Israel. Instead of being alarmed that God was not speaking to them, the people grew more and more sinful. Now it was time, on God's calendar, for the coming of His Son to provide a way of escape for those who would receive Him as Savior. To prepare for this event, God sent John to warn the people of judgment to come. He would be the herald, the announcer, of the coming Messiah. He would prepare the way for the coming of God's Son.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 3:1-12**

In chapter 3, Matthew fast-forwarded more than 25 years from the record of Jesus' childhood in Nazareth (chaps. 1-2) to Jesus' meeting John the Baptist in the Judean desert. Matthew provided a clear comparison of Jesus and John in verses 1-12. John came as a prophet and Jesus as the Savior. Both faithfully carried out their roles in God's plan of salvation.

The people, wearied by the cold heartlessness of their religious leaders, were drawn to John. But he was quick to tell them that the One whom he was heralding would also baptize, but not with water. The baptism of the coming One would be a baptism of fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit.

John was the forerunner for the coming of the Messiah who would bring salvation from sin for those who trusted Him. John faithfully exalted Jesus as the Anointed One and thus fulfilled his divinely appointed mission to prepare the way for Messiah's coming.



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## PREPARING THE WAY (MATT. 3:1-6)

### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Wilderness of Judea**

**John the Baptist** was the son of the elderly priest Zechariah who served in the Jerusalem temple. While Zechariah was attending to his priestly duties at the altar, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear him a son, whom he must name John (Luke 1:13). Only Luke records details about John's birth, concluding with the statement, "The child grew up and became spiritually strong, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (1:80).

**In those days** refers to the years between Joseph and Mary's arrival in Nazareth from Egypt with Jesus until Jesus left His Nazareth home to begin His public ministry when He was about 30 years of age. John was already preaching **in the Wilderness of Judea**, the desert area in the lower Jordan River valley, west of the Dead Sea.

The angel Gabriel had told Zechariah clearly about John's mission. He would preach with authority and with the spirit and power of Elijah. All of this John would do "to make ready for the Lord a prepared people" (Luke 1:17).

**BIBLE SKILL:** Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print or online version) to locate and learn about places mentioned in Scripture.

Locate the Judean wilderness in a Bible atlas. (Tip: Check the atlas index or search on the internet for Judean wilderness.) Note places significant to John's ministry, such as the Jordan River and Jerusalem. Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about the Judean wilderness. What other crucial events in the Bible took place in this wilderness? How does the wilderness serve as an appropriate backdrop for the announcement of the coming Messiah?

#### VERSES 2-4

<sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” <sup>3</sup> For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight! <sup>4</sup> John himself had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John emphasized repentance in his preaching because the sins of the people had alienated them from God. They no longer obeyed His law. To repent means to turn away from a sinful lifestyle that leads away from God’s way of living set forth in Scripture. The first step in turning to God through repentance is to admit our sin. Signs of repentance in a person’s life include confession of sin, evidence of remorse, and abandoning sinful attitudes and practices.

***The kingdom of heaven***, a phrase interchangeable with “the kingdom of God,” was Matthew’s way of respecting the Jewish fear of inadvertently blaspheming the name of God. Jews determined to avoid speaking God’s name as much as possible. Even today, modern religious Jews, in their writings, will not spell out “God,” using rather the term “G-d.” John added that the kingdom of heaven ***has come near***. God’s kingdom is both present and future. Actually, God’s rule transcends all time. This new revelation of God’s kingdom required people to decide whether or not they would follow God.

***Delivering a message of repentance is not always popular. How do we deal with the negative reaction some have when challenged by the need to repent? What motivates people to present the truth regardless of the reaction of others?***

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Matthew further verified John’s identity and mission when he quoted Isaiah’s prophecy: “A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert” (Isa. 40:3). John was a ***voice*** who spoke the words of God. Matthew underscored the urgency in Isaiah’s prophecy when he described John as ***one crying out in the wilderness***. The word translated “crying out” meant to cry with great feeling and deep emotion.



John's physical appearance was strikingly similar to the description of the prophet Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8). His **garment** was made of goat's or camel's hair woven into a thick, rough, dark cloth. This was the common dress of nomadic desert dwellers. The cloth was woven densely to make it waterproof. John may have meant for it to resemble sackcloth, which was a symbol of distress or self-humiliation.

**Locusts and wild honey** was a common diet for people living in the desert. The locust was the migratory phase of the grasshopper, and was food that the people of Israel were allowed to eat. Other kinds of crawling and flying insects were prohibited (Lev. 11:20-23).

***How would you compare John the Baptist's style with that of some of today's recognized religious leaders? How do you think people today would respond to John's appearance and preaching style?***

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## **KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions***

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

### **VERSES 5-6**

**<sup>5</sup> Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were flocking to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.**

News of John's preaching in the wilderness of Judea spread quickly, and people from the area of Jerusalem, the region of Judea, and the Jordan Valley were **flocking to him**. John was the first true prophet Israel had heard in 400 years. He minced no words as he criticized both Herod and the religious leaders because of their sins. He let the people know that they, too, were sinners and needed to repent. For generations, the people had been waiting for a prophet like Elijah, and in the person of John, he had come (Mal. 4:5; Luke 1:17). John's



preaching was so Spirit-filled that many were convicted of their sins, confessed them, and eagerly submitted to his baptism. John's baptism was a sign of repentance and forgiveness.

New Testament Christians today practice believer's baptism, which is a symbolic burial of the old self and a rising to walk in newness of life. Baptism happens after one has personally received Christ as Savior and provides opportunity to tell others where your loyalties really are, who you truly depend on, and the direction your life is now taking. It is a way of saying, "I choose to follow Jesus." To baptize literally means "to immerse or dip."

***What were some factors that probably motivated the large crowds of people to come out to hear John? How did their enthusiasm impact others?***

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## **PROCLAIMING THE TRUTH** (MATT. 3:7-10)

### **VERSES 7-8**

**<sup>7</sup> When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the place of his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" <sup>8</sup> Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance.**

In the midst of his preaching, John ***saw many of the •Pharisees and •Sadducees coming*** to hear him. Though usually mentioned together, Pharisees and Sadducees were quite different in beliefs, character, and intentions. The name *Pharisee* probably comes from a Hebrew/ Aramaic word meaning "the separated ones," describing both their origin and their practices. They generally were politically conservative and religiously liberal and were more popular with common people. They held the minority membership on the Sanhedrin.

The Sadducees, as a group, were smaller in number. They were aristocratic and demonstrated a considerable priestly influence. They were heavily involved in the activities of the temple. They differed from the Pharisees in that they were politically liberal and religiously conservative. They held the majority membership on the Sanhedrin. They stood apart from the common people because of



their economic and political status. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were jealous of each other's control and influence over the people. They were suspicious of anyone whose appeal captured the attention and curiosity of the people. Later, they were often found among the crowds gathered to hear Jesus teach.

Discerning the evil in the hearts of the Pharisees and Sadducees, John called them a **“Brood of vipers!”** (Jesus also used this term; see 12:34; 23:33.) *Vipers* suggest creatures that are subtle in the way they approach and attack their victims. Such was an apt description of the serpent's encounter with Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3).

John showed his disdain for hypocrisy when, with stinging sarcasm, he asked: ***Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*** These religious leaders saw God's judgment only for Gentiles, but John clearly applied it to them. They had a bloated ego because they considered themselves superior in their knowledge of the Scriptures and spiritual matters.

***Sometimes we judgmentally and unkindly refer to some fellow believers as being “pharisaical.” What do we mean by this? How can we avoid the attitude seen in the Pharisees?***

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#### VERSES 9-10

**<sup>9</sup> And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones! <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**

The pious Pharisees and Sadducees were convinced they were automatically assured of God's blessings, regardless of their actions and beliefs, because they were descendants of Abraham. John told them that God could make a nation for Himself from whomever He chose. He illustrated a principle that has always remained true: just as fruit trees bear fruit, so God's people prove the genuineness of their repentance and faith by their good deeds.

John used the analogy of **the ax** to emphasize divine judgment. Not only would the unproductive trees be **cut down**, they also would be thrown on the fire and burned. Jesus used this same illustration to describe false teachers (Matt. 7:19). We can know the reality of a person's faith not by words but by actions.

**List some ways Christians demonstrate the genuineness of their faith.**

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## POINTING TO THE KING (MATT. 3:11-12)

### VERSE 11

**<sup>11</sup> I baptize you with water for repentance, but the One who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove His sandals. He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

John was a signpost pointing the people beyond himself to the Messiah, and he did so with appropriate humility. The lowest act of a household slave was to remove a person's sandals. John placed himself even below that, stating that he was **not worthy** of removing the **sandals** of the Messiah.

**How is a believer's role today similar to the role played by John when Jesus came the first time? How can we point others to Christ?**

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### VERSE 12

**<sup>12</sup> His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff He will burn up with fire that never goes out."**

Those who heard John preach were familiar with the **threshing floor**, a stone or hard-packed dirt surface. Farmers would take a large pitchfork and toss wheat into the air. The wind would blow through it and separate the lighter chaff from the good wheat heads. The farmer



would store the wheat in the granary to be ground later into flour to make bread. He would rake the worthless chaff into piles and burn it. John's message was clear: repent and be saved, or refuse to repent and face God's judgment.

## IN MY CONTEXT

God is at work in our world, unfolding His plans for the redemption of His creation. Depending on anything other than Christ for salvation provides a false hope. Christ is all-powerful, bringing salvation for those who trust Him and judgment for those who reject Him.

***List ways God is at work in your community today. List ways God is working in the lives of people in your community today. Discuss actions the group needs to take to point others to Christ.***

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***Reflect on your commitment to Christ. Make sure you are depending on Him and not on your own abilities to secure your salvation. Review the information on the inside front cover as a part of your reflection.***

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***Identify the names of people in your life who need to be told about Christ and given an opportunity to trust Him. Pray for an opportunity to share with them truths gained from this session.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said:  
A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight! —Matthew 3:3



## Session 2

# THE KING ARRIVES

Jesus' miraculous birth fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

## MATTHEW 1:18-25

**<sup>18</sup> The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly. <sup>20</sup> But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His**



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people from their sins.”<sup>22</sup> Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:<sup>23</sup> See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name Him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”<sup>24</sup> When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her<sup>25</sup> but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.

*Observe all that happened to Joseph in the few hours after the news of Mary’s conception. Consider all that the angel told Joseph during the dream. What do Joseph’s actions reveal about his understanding of the angel’s message?*

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*Underline the words and phrases used to describe or identify the baby. Summarize what these words and phrases reveal about Jesus.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

“I promise.” That statement flows freely in conversation. A promise is an assurance that a specific thing will happen. Some retail establishments post “Promises to Our Customers.” Parents make promises to children. Teachers offer promises to students. Friends dole out promises to friends. Making promises, however, is always easier than keeping them. A broken promise can do great damage to a relationship. But a promise kept often lifts your spirit.

*How did you feel when someone followed through on a commitment to you?*

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God proved Himself to be a promise keeper. His greatest promise was that a Messiah would come to save His people. Throughout much of the history of the Old Testament, God's people anticipated the Messiah's arrival. That history included times of trouble and depression. This heightened their longing for God's Anointed One. They expected Him to bring relief to their desperate situation.

The Messiah, however, did not appear on a human timetable. In fact, many wondered if God forgot His promise. Some people gave up on the Messiah ever coming. Still others latched on to every charismatic figure who arrived on the scene and considered that person the messiah. These would-be messiahs always let people down. As time passed, hope gave way to despair.

God never forgot His people or His promise. He simply waited for just the right moment in history. Matthew wrote to explain how God fulfilled His promise of a King. That Messiah, Jesus, arrived on the scene in a most unusual way. The birth of a special Child brought centuries of waiting to a climax.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 1:1-25**

Matthew did a remarkable thing when he began his Gospel by merging Jesus' human and divine natures. He recorded first Jesus' family tree, generation by generation, as any meticulous historian would do (Matt. 1:1-17). This list of Jesus' ancestors is fascinating, for with it Matthew firmly established Jesus' roots as the world's longed-for Messiah. He then presented the fact of Jesus' miraculous birth with no attempt to veil the report in mystery (vv. 18-25). Matthew accepted the virgin birth of Jesus without question.

The establishment of Jesus' identity as the Messiah is the focal point of the first Gospel. The opening lines provide a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Line by line, Matthew carefully established the truth that the hopes, prophecies, and promises scattered throughout the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The early church leaders placed Matthew first in the New Testament canon no doubt because its teachings would be valuable in establishing this bridge between the Testaments.



Any study of the life and mission of Jesus is effective only if it is based without question on the deity of Christ. With this as his launching pad, Matthew emphasized that God's promises of salvation were not only to a particular people, Israel, but also to all the peoples of the earth. This was a giant step for Jews, who believed that they were indeed God's chosen people. Jesus' own disciples probably struggled with His acceptance of Gentiles. They balked at His involvement with Samaritans, whom they considered unworthy of God's great salvation. Jesus was the international Christ, and as such He came to be the Savior of the whole world. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus included not only the Jews but also reached beyond them to include several ethnic groups that populated the Middle East during the time of Israel's Old Testament history. The commission Jesus gave His followers emphasized that they were to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### SUPERNATURAL CONCEPTION (MATT. 1:18)

#### VERSE 18

**<sup>18</sup> The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.**

Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph *came together*. They were *engaged* at that point. Jewish wedding traditions of that day involved three stages. First, the marriage was arranged by the couple's parents (see Gen. 21:21; 38:6). This sometimes happened when the young couple was 12 or 13 years of age.

A second stage, betrothal, took place about one year before the marriage became final. Many brides probably reached this stage of the process in their early teens. The bride continued to live in her father's house but was considered the wife of her husband. Betrothal was a legally binding contract giving the man legal rights over the woman. This contract could be broken only by a formal process of divorce. Sexual unfaithfulness during this betrothal period was considered adultery, carrying a possible penalty of death by stoning (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:23-24). In New Testament times, however, stoning was rare.

The third stage, marriage, completed the process. A public ceremony marked the occasion, and the couple began to live together as husband and wife. The marriage ceremony was quite an event, climaxing with a wedding supper at the groom's home (Matt. 22:1-14; Ps. 45:14-15). The wedding festivities sometimes lasted for a week or longer (Gen. 29:27). Afterwards the couple established their own home, although they usually lived with the extended family.

Matthew reported that Mary's pregnancy was discovered during the betrothal period before her marriage to Joseph was consummated. According to Greek mythology, many of the Greek gods fathered children. Mary's conception differed in the sense that God made her pregnant miraculously. Matthew reports that **she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit**. Luke also noted the Holy Spirit's role in the conception of Jesus (Luke 1:35). This highlights the divine origin of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The emphasis from the beginning is that Jesus was fully divine and fully human.

***What questions does the description of Jesus' conception given by Matthew answer? How would you describe the significance of Jesus' conception?***

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## **PROMISED MESSIAH (MATT. 1:19-23)**

### **VERSE 19**

***19 So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.***

Even though Joseph and Mary had not lived together as man and wife, Joseph was considered **her husband** because of their betrothal. Matthew wrote that Joseph was **a righteous man**. As such, Joseph did not want to go against God's laws. Matthew did not say how Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy. He simply stated that "it was discovered" (v. 18). Joseph had a very difficult decision to make. Legally he could have a public **divorce**, but that would make Mary a victim of public **disgrace**. Obviously Joseph was a compassionate man and could not bring himself to humiliate Mary. The only other option left for Joseph was to have a private divorce before two witnesses



and quietly dismiss Mary. He would guard his own reputation and yet show compassion toward Mary. Most likely, Mary had not told Joseph about the angel's visit. Until Joseph's own angelic visit, he did not know about the Holy Spirit's role in Mary's pregnancy. Joseph thought he had only two options in this heartbreaking tragedy. But God had another option for him.

***Can you recall a time when you faced a situation in which none of your options seemed good, but God provided a better solution? What is required of you if, like Joseph, you are to receive direction from God in times of trouble or uncertainty?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use a study Bible or one with cross-references to locate Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament.*

Matthew often quoted Old Testament prophecy to demonstrate ways in which Jesus fulfilled those promises. Although the prophets did not know the exact details or timing of Jesus' coming, they proclaimed God's promise of a future Messiah. Read the following examples where Matthew quoted Old Testament passages to illustrate Jesus' fulfillment of Scripture: Matthew 1:22-23; 12:17-21; 21:4-5. Locate and read in your Bible the Old Testament passages quoted by Matthew. How do these passages speak to Jesus' life and ministry?

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### **VERSES 20-23**

**<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His**

people from their sins.”<sup>22</sup> Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:<sup>23</sup> See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name Him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”

On occasion God Himself appeared in the Old Testament as “the Angel of the Lord.” Here, however, the *angel of the Lord* is one of God’s created beings. The word *angel* means “messenger,” which identified one of the primary roles of angels as heavenly beings who delivered a message from God to people. An angel named Gabriel appeared in the Book of Daniel (8:15-26; 9:20-27) and also in Luke’s Gospel to announce the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and the birth of Jesus to Mary (Luke 1:11,19,26). The angel who announced Jesus’ birth to the Bethlehem shepherds and to Joseph *in a dream* is not named.

Dreams were another of God’s ways to communicate with people. They are predominate in three places in the Bible: Genesis 20–41; Daniel 1–7; and Matthew 1–2. Jews believed God revealed His will in dreams (Num. 12:6). In Matthew, God used dreams to guide people (2:12-13,22; 27:19). Though at times we may benefit spiritually from our dreams, we must not assume that they are always valid messages from God.

God sent the angel to Joseph in a dream to correct him in his dealings with Mary, affirming that Mary’s conception was *by the Holy Spirit*. The angel concluded his words to Joseph by telling him what was to happen with Mary and what Joseph was to do about it. The good news was that this Child would *save* God’s *people from their sins*.

Matthew was careful in his gospel to show how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. This Child born to Mary would be named *Immanuel*. He would not be called by this name, but it would describe His role—to be God’s presence with His people. Jesus literally brought God to earth in a human body. Matthew closed his Gospel with this same promise—*God is with us*—by quoting Jesus’ parting words: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). In other words, the name *Jesus* would specify what He does (He saves), whereas *Immanuel* would identify who He is (God with us).



**How do the two names given by the angel complement each other? How are they different? Could Jesus have been one without the other? Explain.**

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## **KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son***

Jesus now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.

### **OBEDIENCE REQUIRED (MATT. 1:24-25)**

#### **VERSE 24**

**<sup>24</sup> When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her**

We learned earlier in this study that Joseph was “a righteous man” (v. 19), and as such, he was sensitive to God’s commands and to the guidance of His Spirit. Just as surely as God chose Mary to conceive and give birth to the Lord Jesus, so He chose Joseph to be His earthly father. At this point in the unfolding drama surrounding Jesus’ conception, Joseph faced probably the most agonizing time of his life. No doubt his love for Mary was strong and unquestionably pure. This young maiden was the apple of his eye. When news came of her pregnancy, we can imagine that his world was shattered and his heart was crushed.

At this low moment, however, he made a decision that reflected his righteous character. ***He did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her.*** Though the angel’s explanation in the dream regarding Mary’s pregnancy went beyond human reason, Joseph believed God had spoken to him through this heavenly messenger. He would obey God’s command through the angel to take Mary to be his wife, though doubtlessly he was aware of the humiliation that could follow for him as well as for Mary. Once he decided to obey God, the decision was no longer difficult. Joseph would simply do what he knew God wanted him to do. In his determination to obey God, he ignored tradition and took Mary as his wife, even though the



customary one-year waiting period had not passed. Because he was a righteous man, Joseph was willing to do what God wanted him to do, no matter what.

***How would you characterize Joseph's actions: as an act of obedience or an act of love? Explain. What role does obedience play in responding to the message of the gospel?***

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#### **VERSE 25**

**<sup>25</sup> but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.**

Matthew was careful to explain that Joseph had no marital relations with Mary until after Jesus was born. This guarded the status of Mary as a virgin and left no place for the argument that Joseph impregnated Mary. This fact also sets aside the notion some have held throughout the centuries that Mary remained a virgin all of her life. For after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph consummated their marriage, and Jesus had at least four half-brothers and some sisters (Matt. 13:55-56). Regarding Jesus' sisters, Matthew wrote: "And His sisters, aren't they all with us?" (v. 56). This would suggest at least three, for had there been only two, Matthew would likely have written, "aren't they both with us?" Jesus' siblings did not recognize Him as the Son of God until after the resurrection. Two of His half-brothers were actively involved in the early church—James, who was a leader in the Jerusalem church and wrote the Epistle of James, and Jude, who authored the New Testament book that bears his name.

Traditionally, male babies were circumcised and named on the eighth day following their birth. Luke records this event in Jesus' life (Luke 2:21). Joseph saw to it that this miracle Child was named according to the angel's instructions: ***Jesus***.

Matthew's Gospel introduces Jesus as One who was both fully human and fully divine. He was born to a woman, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and given a name that reflected His fulfillment of God's plan.



## IN MY CONTEXT

Since Jesus is fully human and fully divine, He alone is qualified to provide our salvation. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, proving that He is the Messiah. God's redemptive plan calls for obedience.

***Jesus was fully human and fully divine. What makes this statement difficult for some people to believe? How can you use verses from Matthew's account to help someone understand this truth? How would you explain the importance of this truth?***

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***Reflect on the two names of Jesus given by the angel. List ways the realities of these names are being seen in your Bible study group. Discuss as a group how these two names should impact how the group functions in the future.***

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***Identify specific attitudes and actions that demonstrate your obedience to God's commandments relating to His redemptive plan for your life. In what areas of your life is God calling for a deeper obedience? What steps are you taking to be obedient in those areas?***

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## MEMORY VERSE

She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. —Matthew 1:21



## Session 3

# THE KING WORSHIPED

Jesus is worthy of worship.

## MATTHEW 2:1-12

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born. <sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah: because



out of you will come a leader who will shepherd My people Israel.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find Him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship Him.” <sup>9</sup> After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen in the east! It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed beyond measure. <sup>11</sup> Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.

*Underline words or phrases that reveal or suggest emotions being expressed. Determine what the emotions expressed reveal about the person expressing the emotion.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Astronomers are elated when they discover a new star in the process of being born. Nova is a term used for a star that suddenly increases in brightness by thousands to millions of times its original intensity, and then decreases in brightness over a period of months to years. A supernova is the explosion of a star that may reach a maximum brilliance one billion times that of the sun. With the invention of larger and stronger telescopes, scientists are becoming more knowledgeable concerning objects in outer space.

The wonder of it all is that God created the universe and all it contains. He established a time cycle in which we live our lives. The birth and death of a star, which we calculate in time, is but a small part of the magnificence of God’s creation.

**List occurrences in nature that fascinate you. What feature or element of each item listed captures your attention the most?**

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God used a star to figure into the events surrounding the birth of His Son. This is one of many instances in the Bible where God demonstrated His sovereignty by doing something that went beyond the boundaries of our human understanding. By providing a fabulous GPS system from outer space, God enhanced the wise men's determination to find the baby Jesus and worship Him.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 2:1-23**

Matthew was careful in his Gospel to establish Jesus' right to be Israel's true and final King. In chapter 1, he gave Jesus' royal genealogy beginning with Abraham, and then, as further evidence, he included the account of Jesus' virgin birth. In chapter 2, Matthew further confirmed Jesus' royal right to the throne of David by listing three additional pieces of evidence. First, he provided a detailed account of the visit of the wise men in their quest to find and worship the One "who has been born King of the Jews" (v. 2).

Another evidence of Jesus' right to David's throne was the negative reaction of Herod, who saw the possibility of a threat to his throne (vv. 3-4). Herod was threatened by the wise men's belief that this Child they sought was the prophesied King of the Jews. Herod was an Edomite, not a Jew, and thus had no legitimate claim to be the Jews' king. Herod knew that he himself was a usurper to the throne on which he sat only because of Rome, who ruled Judah by military force.

The third evidence of Christ's kingship in this chapter are the four Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled during Jesus' infancy. Each of the predictions pointed to a geographical location closely related to the birth and early childhood of Jesus: Bethlehem (v. 6), Egypt (v. 15), Ramah (v. 18), and Nazareth (v. 23). This lesson focuses on the prediction of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and the coming of the wise men to worship Him.



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE SEARCH (MATT. 2:1-2)

### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem,**

Matthew's mention of Jesus' birthplace was more than just a biographer's way of noting the location of his subject's birth. Matthew knew that the prophet Micah had prophesied **Bethlehem** as the place of the Messiah's birth (see Mic. 5:2). Bethlehem is located approximately five miles south of Jerusalem. The town is located along the ancient main highway from Jerusalem to Egypt. Bethlehem was once called Ephrath, or Ephrathah, and is mentioned by that name several times in the Old Testament (Gen. 35:16; Ruth 4:11; Ps. 132:6).

Before Jesus' birth, the small town of Bethlehem had figured into several significant Old Testament events. Jacob buried his wife, Rachel, at Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19). Ruth met Boaz in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:22–2:6), and David, their famous grandson and future king of Israel, grew up in Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1; 17:12). By the time Jesus was born there, Bethlehem had long been called "the city of David" (Luke 2:4,11). Matthew identified the town as Bethlehem **of Judea** to distinguish it from another town of the same name.

Only Matthew among the four Gospel writers recorded the coming of the **wise men** to Bethlehem in their search for the One born to be King of the Jews. Few biblical stories are as clouded by myth and tradition as that of the wise men. The only true facts we know about these particular men are those given in the first 12 verses of Matthew 2. They were **from the east**, perhaps Persia. Somehow they had been influenced by Judaism and possibly by some of the prophetic writings, especially Daniel. Many God-fearing Gentiles lived during the time of Christ, some of whom are mentioned in the New Testament, such as Cornelius and Lydia (Acts 10:1-2; 16:14).

### VERSE 2

**<sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we**



**saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”**

When these wise men arrived in Jerusalem they probably expected to find people excited about the birth of this special Child. They went throughout the city asking about Him. Surely they were shocked that no one seemed to know what they were talking about, even though a general expectation of the coming of a great king, a great deliverer, existed during this time.

Matthew did not explain how God revealed to the wise men that the King of the Jews had been born, only that He had given them a sign—***His star in the east***. Speculation about this star has been widespread, from one extreme to another. Since Matthew does not supply any details about this star, it would be wise to identify it as another of the unexplainable miracles surrounding the birth of Christ. This brilliant light served as God’s way to guide these men to the Christ child.

The wise men stated without apology that they had ***come to worship Him***. Their worship may have been no more than the paying of homage to royalty at this point in their quest. Yet the homage these foreigners paid to Jesus showed more respect than many of His own people gave Him.

***What factors contribute to a person’s desire to worship God? To what extent are these factors, if any, seen in the lives of the wise men?***

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## **KEY DOCTRINE: *God***

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.

## **THE INQUIRY (MATT. 2:3-6)**

### **VERSES 3-4**

**<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> So he assembled all the chief priests and**



scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.

The wise men’s arrival in Jerusalem and subsequent search for the “King of the Jews” (v. 2) **disturbed** Herod. •**Herod** (see p. 6) had earned a reputation for mental and emotional instability. So the possibility of another king threatened him. He tolerated no person who sought to take his place. Herod’s first response to this news was to assemble **all the chief priests and scribes of the people** and inquire of them **where the Messiah would be born**. He connected the King of the Jews whom the wise men were seeking with the Messiah, the Christ. The *chief priests* probably were mostly Sadducees, while the *scribes* (the teachers of the law) were generally Pharisees (see Mark 2:16). Herod hoped that he could discover from these men where the Child was to be born.

**BIBLE SKILL:** *Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.*

On one side of the vertical line, identify words and phrases that describe Herod’s attitude and actions toward Jesus. On the other side, note words and phrases that describe the wise men’s attitude and actions toward Jesus.

HEROD	WISE MEN
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**VERSES 5-6**

<sup>5</sup> **“In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah: because out of you will come a leader who will shepherd My people Israel.”**

Herod’s question was a simple one for these religious leaders to answer. They quickly pointed him to the words of the prophet Micah. Seven centuries before, Micah had given the exact location of the Messiah’s birth (Mic. 5:2). This was common knowledge among

the Jews, for John included in his Gospel these words from the Passover crowd in Jerusalem who had heard Jesus speak: “Doesn’t the Scripture say that the Messiah comes from David’s offspring and from the town of Bethlehem, where David once lived?” (John 7:42). Yet these religious leaders did not appear impressed by the wise men’s announcement that they had seen the star given as a sign of the Messiah’s birth.

The last phrase of the religious leaders’ answer to Herod, ***a leader who will shepherd My people Israel***, was not a part of Micah 5:2. It placed the emphasis on the kind of person who would rule. The popular idea of a shepherd is one who provides kind, tender care (Ps. 23). The biblical idea also included the shepherd’s authority and strong leadership. All of these scriptural facts about the birth of the Messiah were well-known by these religious leaders. Yet when the Messiah came, they did not recognize Him and thus they rejected Him .

***How do you account for the religious leaders being so well-versed in the Scriptures yet missing the arrival of the Messiah? How does the same thing happen today?***

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## **THE PLOT** (MATT. 2:7-8)

### **VERSES 7-8**

**<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find Him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship Him.”**

Herod had a devious, calculating mind. The fear of losing his throne caused him to be suspicious of anything and anyone beyond his control. He knew that he must quickly get to the bottom of this matter, so he arranged for a secret meeting with these wise men. He already had received the word he wanted from the religious leaders among the Jews. They had told him what their sacred Scriptures had declared about the arrival of this long-awaited Messiah. Now it was time to have a serious conversation with these foreigners who had



appeared so unexpectedly in Jerusalem. Herod was not concerned about the meaning or significance of this star they claimed to have followed but only about **the exact time** it had **appeared**. If he could learn the time of the star's appearance, he could determine the age of this Child who had been born. Herod appeared sincere as he told the wise men to find this Child and then return and tell him so that he could also go and worship him. In his spiritual blindness and hypocrisy, He was certain that he had devised a fail-proof plot. This Child born in Bethlehem would indeed die at the hands of God's enemies, but His sacrificial death would come on God's schedule and not Herod's.

***What does Herod's plot reveal about him? What does it reveal about Jesus and God's sovereign plan?***

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## **THE PRESENTATION** (MATT. 2:9-12)

### **VERSES 9-10**

**<sup>9</sup> After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen in the east! It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed beyond measure.**

God sometimes uses surprising means to reveal His will and provide guidance for His people. He used Herod, a pagan and an enemy of the true God, to give the wise men the directions they needed. As they left Jerusalem the wise men headed south toward Bethlehem. Immediately, God again resumed His role as their guide: ***And there it was—the star they had seen in the east!*** As already noted, this was no ordinary star. The original appearance could have been a scientifically explainable occurrence. But the direct guidance it provided on the second part of the wise men's journey signaled a supernatural event. These men had faithfully followed this star a great distance as ***it led them***, then it ***stopped above the place where the child was***. Matthew did not describe how the star moved or how it shined specifically over the house where the Christ child was. He said that when they saw the star ***they were overjoyed beyond measure***. At

last their journey was over and their quest was complete.

#### VERSES 11-12

**<sup>11</sup> Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.**

The wise men reached the place over which the star hovered and entered **the house**. When they saw the Child with Mary, they fell to their knees and **worshiped Him**. They did not worship Mary, whom they recognized as the Child's mother, though she was one upon whom the Lord had bestowed a special favor.

These men, apparently men of wealth, brought **gifts** for the infant King. **Gold** was universally considered a symbol of nobility and royalty. This Child was indeed destined to be King of kings. **Frankincense** was a fragrant incense considered a gift for deity (Isa. 60:6). It was also used in the grain offerings in the tabernacle and temple (Lev. 2:2,15-16), in processions of royalty (Song of Sol. 3:6-7), and occasionally in wedding ceremonies. **Myrrh**, though not as expensive as frankincense, was nevertheless a valuable fragrance. It is mentioned throughout the Bible, and when mixed with other spices it was part of the preparation of bodies for burial (see John 19:39).

After this time of worship, the men left the house. At some point they were **warned in a dream** not to return to Herod as he had instructed them. This divine communication was evidence that the wise men's role in this event was by God's design. In the dream they were further told to return home **by another route**. Nothing more is recorded in Scripture about these men, but we can be sure they bore witness in their homeland to the miracle of God's power and grace they had experienced.

***What challenge does this passage bring to you about the correlation between worship and gift-giving? What gifts do you have to offer out of the treasures of your life?***



## IN MY CONTEXT

God reveals His truth to people who are honestly seeking to discover that truth. Rejecting Jesus as King doesn't change the fact that He is King. Jesus is worthy of our worship regardless of the cost.

***Where do you see God at work revealing His plan for redemption in the world today? What role do you see yourself playing in this work?***

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***Reflect on the different ways people respond to the truth of the gospel (accept, reject, ignore). In your context, what could be used to help those who try to reject and ignore the gospel? Write your thoughts and ask God for the opportunity to share them with someone this week.***

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***List specific ways the wise men pleased God from the time they left their homeland to their departure from Bethlehem. Relate their commitment to what God expects of your Bible study group. How can your group become a group that reflects the attitudes carried by the wise men? Commit to take actions to become more like that type of group.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. —Matthew 2:11





Session 4

# THE KING TEMPTED

Jesus faced temptations and yet never sinned.

## MATTHEW 4:1-10

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. <sup>2</sup> After He had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry. <sup>3</sup> Then the tempter approached Him and said, “If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” <sup>4</sup> But He answered, “It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” <sup>5</sup> Then the Devil took Him to the holy city, had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: He will give His angels orders concerning you, and they will support you with



DATE OF MY BIBLE STUDY: \_\_\_\_\_

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their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

<sup>7</sup> Jesus told him, “It is also written: Do not test the Lord your God.” <sup>8</sup> Again, the Devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

<sup>9</sup> And he said to Him, “I will give You all these things if You will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.”

*Identify the temptations being presented by Satan. Consider how similar temptations are presented in our world.*

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*How did Jesus begin each of His responses to Satan's temptations?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Serbian rebels shot down Captain Scott O’Grady’s aircraft in 1995 during the war in Bosnia. Captain O’Grady, an American fighter pilot, ejected from his plane and landed safely in enemy territory. Although he was in danger, he resisted the temptation to radio for help immediately. The pilot’s training cautioned that use of the radio too soon after landing might alert the enemy to his position. So O’Grady waited and utilized his survival training. Four days into the ordeal the pilot finally switched on his radio briefly to call in his position to an American plane flying overhead. The call set in motion O’Grady’s dramatic rescue.

The officer’s delay in using the radio for help made for some uncomfortable days and nights in the cold without food. However, doing so probably saved his life. Resisting the temptation to call for help immediately gave Captain O’Grady the opportunity to find out what he was made of. He emerged from the nightmare a stronger

person.

***What temptations plague you? How prepared are you to resist them?  
What can you learn from the struggle with temptation?***

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The enticement to sin—temptation—plagues every human (1 Cor. 10:13). The reality of temptation requires constant vigilance on the part of Christians. Temptation, however, is not sin. Temptation is the offer of an opportunity to sin. Often a time of temptation causes you to wrestle with yourself about how to respond. This may stretch you, as it did Captain O’Grady, to discover what you are made of when Christ changes your life.

Jesus faced temptations. Although He was the divine Son of God, He also took on a human nature. He experienced the struggles common to any person, including temptation to sin. But even when challenged by temptation Jesus did not sin. In the process of this temptation experience, He found confirmation of God’s will for His life and the determination to follow it. From this Bible passage we can discover how confronting temptation can shape and strengthen believers. We can learn much from Jesus’ example about how to resist temptation.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 3:1–4:25**

Matthew 3:1–4:25 sets the stage for Jesus’ public ministry. As we saw in session 1, John the Baptist called people to repent and baptized them as a public witness to their repentance of sin (3:1-12). John clearly pointed to Jesus as God’s chosen Messiah.

When Jesus was ready to begin His public ministry, He went to be baptized by John (vv. 13-17). Jesus did not need to repent of sin; He never sinned. But He used the act of baptism to demonstrate obedient submission to God’s call. Through baptism, He identified Himself with sinners who confessed their sin. Jesus spent His ministry relating to sinners. Ultimately Jesus asked His followers to be baptized as a way to identify with Him. His own baptism served as



an example for them to follow.

Immediately following His baptism, Jesus was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil” (4:1). His temptations helped clarify His role as Son of God. The end result of the experience proved Jesus to be equipped uniquely to represent the Father in this world.

After John’s arrest, Jesus withdrew into Galilee (4:12-22). This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 9:1-2). In Galilee, Jesus proclaimed the same repentance theme as John, and He called His first disciples.

The end of chapter four summarizes the methods Jesus used to convey His message. He taught in the synagogues, preached the good news of the kingdom, and healed the people. Large crowds of people from Galilee and beyond began to follow Jesus (Matt. 4:23-25).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### FACE OFF (MATT. 4:1)

Many lessons surface as we consider the account of Jesus’ temptation. Perhaps the most important is that following every victory comes temptation, or testing. Paul’s words to the Corinthians ring true for all of us: “So, whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Not even Jesus was exempt from temptation. In his record of Jesus’ temptations, Mark stressed that they came “immediately” after His baptism (Mark 1:12), that high point when the Father had indicated approval of His Son from heaven. While Jesus was still savoring this glorious affirmation from His Father, the dark clouds of temptation came.

### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil.**

Matthew writes that Jesus was *led up by the Spirit* into the wilderness. Mark’s Gospel states that “the Spirit drove Him” (Mark 1:12). This shows that the temptation encounter with Satan was permitted by God as a part of His plan to provide redemption for sinners through the obedience and sacrifice of His Son. **Wilderness**

describes a lonely and desolate place where wild animals lived. The word **tempted** simply means “tested.” Whether the testing is for good or bad depends on the one giving the test. Satan’s intent, obviously, was to entice Jesus to do evil.

**Devil** is one of the most common names used for Satan in the Bible. The word means “accuser” or “slanderer.” This appearance of Satan shows clearly that he is a personal being. Because God cast him out of heaven, Satan’s fury has been aimed in full force against God and His work in the world, particularly Jesus’ divine mission of salvation.

***For whose benefit do you think this confrontation was allowed: Jesus’ or Satan’s?***

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## TEMPTATION OF PROVISION (MATT. 4:2-4)

### VERSES 2-3

**<sup>2</sup> After He had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry. <sup>3</sup> Then the tempter approached Him and said, “If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”**

For 40 days and nights after He entered the wilderness, Jesus **fasted**. This was not a token fast Jesus endured. He denied Himself the physical sustenance the body needs in order to exist. Matthew noted that at the end of Jesus’ fast, He was **hungry**. Jesus was in communion with His Father during His 40-day fast. This gave Him spiritual strength, even in His weakest physical moments, to overcome Satan’s most devious attacks. Mark 1:13 and Luke 4:2 indicate that Jesus was constantly being tempted throughout His wilderness stay. Satan’s strategy likely was to wear Jesus down before he confronted Him with the three temptations recorded in our passage.

After Jesus’ time of fasting, **the tempter approached Him**. We are not told what form Satan took when he confronted Jesus, although we know it was direct and personal. They engaged in conversation with one another and even moved about together from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem to a high mountain.

The first temptation dealt with an obvious situation. Jesus



had fasted 40 days and nights, and He was famished. What could possibly be wrong with turning some of these small stones into bread? Would a loving, heavenly Father deny so simple a solution to His Son's ravishing hunger?

Satan prefaced his temptation with the statement, "***If You are the Son of God.***" The *if* could just as well have been "since," for both Satan and Jesus knew the truth. Satan was tempting Jesus to put His physical needs above His spiritual needs.

***When do you find yourself most vulnerable to certain temptations? How does our ability to reason betray us when facing temptation?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Jesus***

Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin.

### **VERSE 4**

***4 But He answered, "It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."***

Satan's temptations followed the same pattern first revealed in the garden of Eden and that he continues to use to this day: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (see 1 John 2:16). Jesus' answer to each temptation was a direct quote from God's Word. "***It is written***" was the phrase that each time stopped Satan in his tracks. All three quotes are found in Deuteronomy. Satan may have thought he could engage Jesus in a conversation, as he had done with Eve. Jesus simply quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, emphasizing the fact that the Israelites in the desert could not provide bread for themselves and would have to depend on the manna God sent from heaven. Jesus would depend on God to meet His daily needs. Furthermore, Jesus did ***not live on bread alone but on every word***



*that comes from the mouth of God.*

***What physical needs do people allow to come between them and God? How can Jesus' response help you face temptation when dealing with a physical need?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

Jesus used Old Testament Scripture from Deuteronomy to defend against temptation. The Old Testament helped strengthen Him to be obedient to God alone. The New Testament offers similar instruction for Christians on overcoming temptation. Read and reflect on 1 Corinthians 10:13 and James 1:13-18. What principles do you find in these passages that can bolster you when your faith is tested?

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**TEMPTATION OF PROTECTION** (MATT. 4:5-7)

**VERSES 5-6**

**<sup>5</sup> Then the Devil took Him to the holy city, had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: He will give His angels orders concerning you, and they will support you with their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”**

Satan next took Jesus to ***the pinnacle of the temple*** in Jerusalem. Bible students debate where this pinnacle was. It may have been the southeast corner of the temple area, which is some 450 feet high over the Kidron Valley, or on one of the high gates of the temple. Again, Satan introduced this second temptation with the conditional statement, “***If*** (since) ***You are the Son of God,***” seeking to put Jesus on the defensive.



This time, Satan quoted Scripture to justify his challenge (Ps. 91:11-12). Jesus had quoted Scripture to nullify Satan's first temptation, and Satan decided to use the same approach to convince Jesus to commit a sin of presumption. The Devil put a new twist on this second temptation. He quoted Scripture out of context. He made it sound as though God removes the natural consequences of sinful or presumptuous acts. Jesus knew that neither jumping from the pinnacle of the temple in a public display nor doing so simply to test God's promises would be within God's will for His Son. The psalm Satan quoted promises God's protection for His people who are striving to live within His will, yet unintentionally find themselves in danger. God does not promise His protective care for those who deliberately or carelessly place themselves at risk in order to test God's care for them.

#### VERSE 7

**<sup>7</sup> Jesus told him, "It is also written: Do not test the Lord your God."**

Jesus countered Satan's temptation with a quote from Deuteronomy 6:16 that relates to an incident during the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness (see Ex. 17:1-7). The people were without water and threatened to mutiny against Moses and return to Egypt if he did not lead them to water. Moses accused the people of testing God.

Indeed, Jesus could have jumped from the pinnacle of the temple, and angels would have protected Him from harm. Yet for Him to do that would have been a frivolous test of God's power outside His Father's will. Jesus knew there is no need to test God because God can be trusted.

***How would you define the difference between testing God and taking a step of faith in trust of God? How does this passage speak to the difference?***

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### TEMPTATION OF POWER (MATT. 4:8-10)

#### VERSES 8-9

**<sup>8</sup> Again, the Devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup> And he**

**said to Him, “I will give You all these things if You will fall down and worship me.”**

In this final temptation we see Satan’s desperation. The Devil had tried to get Jesus to do something for Himself (turn stones to bread). Then Satan had proposed a sensational jump from the temple pinnacle to prove what the Father could do for Him. Now, with diabolical boldness, Satan dared to suggest what he could do for Jesus if Jesus would do something in return for him.

We are not told where Satan took Jesus for this last temptation. No mountaintop would be high enough to allow one to see with the natural eye all of the world’s kingdoms. Likely it was a visionary experience God permitted Satan to produce. In one panoramic sweep, Jesus saw all of the world’s kingdoms.

Jesus Himself called Satan “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). In spite of his offer to give the world’s kingdoms to Jesus, Satan knew that one day Jesus would rule over the world (see Phil. 2:9-11). Satan’s presumption was to challenge Jesus to ignore God’s timing. The Devil was offering the kingdoms of the world to Jesus on the spot—but there was a catch. Jesus must bow down and worship him.

#### **VERSE 10**

**<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.”**

Satan had come to the bottom line in all of his maneuvering. He wanted Jesus to worship him. Showing divine impatience with His adversary, Jesus said, “**Go away, Satan!**” Satan’s proposal was so preposterous that Jesus dismissed him, ending this particular encounter with no recourse for Satan, even though the tempter would be back to challenge Jesus again (see Luke 4:13). One last time, Jesus spoke God’s Word, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13. The choice was between God and Satan. Only by worshiping and serving the Father alone would Jesus be able to complete His mission to provide salvation to the world.

***What things are people tempted to worship in place of or alongside God? How do these things compare to the third temptation faced by Jesus?***



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## IN MY CONTEXT

God may use times of temptation to sharpen and shape us. Scripture is a sure defense against the attacks of Satan. We demonstrate trust in God by standing against the short-term promises of temptation.

***Reflect on the temptations you are facing in your life. Consider how your resistance to each temptation demonstrates trust in God. List actions you can take to demonstrate trust in God in each situation.***

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***As a Bible study group, discuss how being involved in a regular study of God's Word helps you recognize and deal with temptation. Discuss how the group can encourage each other to memorize Scripture.***

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***Identify the temptation you most commonly face. List the short-term promise of the temptation and the long-term promise of resisting. Determine ways of keeping the long-term promises of resisting at the forefront when facing that temptation.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Then Jesus told him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him." —Matthew 4:10



## Session 5

# THE KING'S EXPECTATIONS

The blessings of the King are on His followers who exhibit His character.

## MATTHEW 5:1-16

<sup>1</sup> When He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. <sup>2</sup> Then He began to teach them, saying: <sup>3</sup> “The poor in spirit are blessed, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. <sup>4</sup> Those who mourn are blessed, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> The gentle are blessed, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup> The merciful are blessed, for they will be shown mercy. <sup>8</sup> The pure in heart are blessed, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> The peacemakers are blessed, for they will be called sons of God. <sup>10</sup> Those who are persecuted for righteousness are blessed, for the



kingdom of heaven is theirs. <sup>11</sup> You are blessed when they insult and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. <sup>12</sup> Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you. <sup>13</sup> You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men. <sup>14</sup> You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

*Observe Jesus' repetition of the word "blessed." Look for how each promise is related to the characteristic identified.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

New parents testify to a lifestyle shift that stems from the arrival of a baby in the home. It's a turning point that requires big changes. Sleep patterns become erratic. Time demands create stress. Financial resources get stretched. A new baby in the home means a change in priorities for everyone living there. One positive change that takes place involves a new love that develops in a parent's heart. All the adjustments are worth it because the couple desires the best for their child.

***What are some other events in life that can create a change in priorities?***

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An encounter with Christ is a turning point. It should evoke a



willing alteration in priorities for the new believer. A true conversion experience creates change. Jesus clearly identified the characteristics that He expects His followers to exhibit. These character traits are not optional for believers. They are Christ's expectations for all His followers.

The passage for this session shows that Jesus' expectations are not a hardship to be endured. Rather, they define a way of life that results in God's blessings. Believers can anticipate an exciting journey into Christlike character that causes their lives to be richly blessed.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 5:1-16**

Religion in Jesus' day was a system of burdensome rules and regulations. The religious leaders, for the most part, were hypocritical and legalistic. Jesus' attitude toward the law of Moses was a refreshing change. He emphasized faithful and sincere obedience instead of a lifeless, ceremonial religion. Jesus sought to bring the focus back to the true messages of the Old Testament prophets recorded in the Scriptures. Because of their religious leaders' false teachings, the people did not understand that those ancient prophets were encouraging a heartfelt obedience to God's message and not a mere dutiful observance of laws and rituals.

Matthew 5–7 comprises what is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began this sermon probably while seated among His disciples and other followers on a hillside somewhere around the Sea of Galilee (5:1-2). The first section of the sermon is known as the Beatitudes (vv. 3-12). In the Beatitudes, Jesus identified His standards for His followers and promised blessings for those who exhibit His character.

In verses 13-16, Jesus explained the outcome when Christians reflect the character of Christ in their lives. He used two common household items, salt and light, to illustrate the influence Christians have in the world. A true disciple makes a difference in the world. The character of Christ cannot describe who you are without also affecting what you do.



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE NEW MOSES (MATT. 5:1-2)

### VERSES 1-2

**<sup>1</sup> When He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. <sup>2</sup> Then He began to teach them, saying:**

Jesus showed compassion for *the crowds* who followed Him. People flocked to Jesus from all levels of society. Among them were the physically sick, emotionally unstable, demon possessed, financially destitute, uneducated and illiterate. Mingling with this motley crowd were those who were religiously influential and politically powerful. They had no idea that Jesus was the Son of God. To them, He was an itinerant preacher from Galilee, one of many who appeared from time to time. Some of them had a following for a while, but they were not genuine or trustworthy, and they soon faded.

But Jesus was different. By nature, He was the essence of love which, like a magnet, drew people to Him. Furthermore, He preached on His own authority, quoting no traditions or great rabbis for His sources. He was “the new Moses” and yet was so totally different from that great lawgiver. Moses descended Mount Sinai with God’s law and confronted the people with God’s judgment because of their sins. Jesus delivered His message from a mountain, but He came emphasizing the reality of a loving God who was ready to forgive sin.

When Jesus saw this multitude of people approaching Him, He ascended a mountain and *sat down*. When a rabbi sat down to teach, those who listened could be sure that what he said was spoken with authority. Words spoken while he was standing or walking were considered informal and unofficial. When Jesus’ disciples saw Him seated, they *came to Him*, for no doubt they recognized He was about to teach them.

***What are some characteristics of a speaker that make you want to listen?  
What did Jesus do that caused others to stop and listen to Him?***

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## KEY DOCTRINE: *Education*

In Jesus Christ abide all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

### THE NEW BLESSINGS (MATT. 5:3-12)

The Beatitudes with which Jesus began His Sermon on the Mount are not multiple choice. Just as we do not pick and choose which of the fruits of the Spirit we will adopt, so also do we not select which of the Beatitudes we will ask God to help us develop in our lives. The Beatitudes must be taken as a whole, describing the way God's people must live if they expect Christ to be seen in them.

The word *blessed*, with which Jesus began each Beatitude, can mean "happiness." Typically, we think of happiness as an emotional response that is dependent on circumstances. Jesus' idea of happiness is related to the truth that God is at work in you at all times.

Religion in Jesus' day was not associated with happiness in the lives of the people. Many people saw God as a Divine Being poised to mete out judgment on sinful human beings. There was little room for joyfulness in the religion of the Jews. The people who heard Jesus preach and teach considered Him a rabbi, but He was in no way like most of the rabbis who interpreted God's law to them. He began His preaching not with condemnation and a fearful anticipation of judgment to come, but with a resounding theme of happiness. Over and over again He repeated it. What Jesus came preaching was indeed good news.

### VERSES 3-6

<sup>3</sup> **"The poor in spirit are blessed, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.** <sup>4</sup> **Those who mourn are blessed, for they will be comforted.** <sup>5</sup> **The gentle are blessed, for they will inherit the earth.** <sup>6</sup> **Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed, for they will be filled.**

In systematic order, Jesus described eight character traits that identify true citizens of the kingdom of heaven. It is easy to imagine the sparkle in His eyes and the joyful expression on His face as He



repeated the same opening words for each beatitude. Jesus began with ***the poor in spirit***, those who are aware of their total need for God. True happiness comes when people realize they are spiritually bankrupt before God and must rely on His strength. God gladly gives the kingdom of heaven to those who come to Him in humility and faith (Luke 12:12).

Jesus' second Beatitude addressed the inescapable fact that sadness is going to be a part of life in this imperfect, sinful world. We ***mourn*** when we face some great sorrow, experience some devastating tragedy, or are forced to accept failure—and the list of things that cause us to mourn is endless. This Beatitude, however, probably refers to godly mourning, a true sorrow for our sins which leads to repentance. This kind of mourning brings the comfort of God's grace and forgiveness.

***The gentle are blessed*** was Christ's third Beatitude. This word translated "gentle" implies humility and trust in God rather than a self-centered attitude. The ***earth*** Jesus said the meek would inherit refers to the new heaven and new earth promised to believers (Rev. 21:1).

In the fourth Beatitude Jesus implied that spiritual poverty leads to ***hunger and thirst for righteousness***. God's gift of kingdom life is the only genuine satisfaction for those who yearn for true justice, personal righteousness, and salvation.

***How are you tempted to "make it on your own" in certain areas of need rather than seeking God's help and provision?***

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#### VERSES 7-12

**<sup>7</sup> The merciful are blessed, for they will be shown mercy.**

**<sup>8</sup> The pure in heart are blessed, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> The peacemakers are blessed, for they will be called sons of God.**

**<sup>10</sup> Those who are persecuted for righteousness are blessed, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. <sup>11</sup> You are blessed when they insult and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. <sup>12</sup> Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great**

**in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Jesus' fifth Beatitude focused on mercy: ***The merciful are blessed, for they will be shown mercy.*** The word *merciful* implies generosity, compassion, and forgiveness. Mercy is a part of God's nature. He forgives sin and shows kindness to the downtrodden. It is second nature for those who have experienced God's mercy to show the same mercy to others.

***The pure in heart are blessed, for they will see God*** is the sixth Beatitude. Purity of heart is single-minded devotion to God. It is the quality of those who are aware of the total need for God, mourn their spiritual poverty, and hunger and thirst for His righteousness. The pure will *see God* and experience intimate fellowship with Him.

***The peacemakers are blessed, for they will be called sons of God*** is Jesus' seventh Beatitude. Peace describes a state of wholeness and completeness in all areas of life, including one's relationship with God and with others. Those who strive to make peace do the work of God and will be called *sons of God*.

In the last beatitude, Jesus dealt with an inevitable fact of life for true followers of Christ: they will be ***persecuted***. Those who are persecuted because they serve Christ can rejoice because their ***reward is great in heaven***.

***Review the eight characteristics in the Beatitudes. Which one do you believe to be the most needed in our world today? Which one is most needed in your community?***

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## **THE NEW EXPECTATIONS (MATT. 5:13-16)**

### **VERSE 13**

**<sup>13</sup> You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men.**

Jesus stated that those who exhibit the qualities expressed in the Beatitudes will function as salt and light in the world. This is not a



choice; it is a fact. Those who possess a genuine Christian character are going to impact the world. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus did not ask His Father to take His followers out of the world (John 17:15). Rather, He sent them forth to impact the world. His plan was for them to be in the world, but not of it.

**Salt** was very valuable in Jesus' day. The Romans believed that, except for the sun, nothing was worth more than salt. They often paid their soldiers in salt, a practice from which came the saying "not worth his salt." Salt is a flavoring agent, for certain foods would be tasteless and flat without the proverbial pinch of salt. Salt is also a preservative, absorbing water from foods, making them too dry to support harmful mold or bacteria.

Much of the salt used in Jesus' day came from the Dead Sea. The impure salt taken from the sea and its immediate surroundings was susceptible to deterioration that left only useless crystals. Such salt could not be restored and thus had lost its saltiness. Jesus said it was good for nothing but to be **thrown out and trampled on**. The analogy Jesus intended is obvious: weak and compromising Christians lose their spiritual flavor to attract unbelievers away from the tasteless and sinful society in which they live.

***"Flavor" is a word that is usually applied to food or drink. Food can appear very attractive, but unless it is properly flavored it loses its attractiveness after the first bite. How can you compare this to the life of a follower of Christ? How would you describe the spiritual "flavor" of your life?***

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#### **VERSES 14-16**

**<sup>14</sup> You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."**

Jesus came as light into a spiritually dark world. He expected His



disciples to reflect His light. He compared the light of His followers to **a city situated on a hill**, whose lights cannot be hidden. Jesus then compared His followers to a **lamp** used to bring light to a darkened house. He pointed out the foolishness of lighting a lamp and then putting it under a large **basket** (probably a clay jar). Houses in Jesus' day were dark, often having only one small window high on one wall. This was to keep thieves from entering the house. Many would have a portable **lampstand** on which a lamp would be placed. The stand could be moved from one location to another in the house, providing light wherever it was needed.

The comparison Jesus intended was obvious. His disciples were to reflect the light of their Master, who was the Light of the world. The combined lights of the city on the hillside could not be hidden. As lamps lighted in a darkened house, they must no more try to hide their lights than one would turn down a clay jar over a lighted lamp, thus blocking its light. Rather, the light was to shine in the best location, so that **all who are in the house** could see. True believers reflect from within them the Lord Jesus, who is the Light of the world.

**What other analogies could be used to explain the truth Jesus was teaching in this passage?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use a concordance and/or Bible dictionary (either print or online version) to learn more about a prominent Bible theme.*

Use a concordance to find references in Scripture to "light." Note instances in which the Bible attributes the origin and source of light to be God or Jesus. Contemplate what Jesus' claim to be the Light of the world (John 8:12) and His command to Christians to be the light of the world (Matt. 5:14) mean for you.

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Following Jesus carries expectations for living in accordance with His standards. Believers are to represent Christ to and in this world by both deed and word.

***Reflect on the eight characteristics identified by Jesus in the Beatitudes. In which of these areas are you most openly demonstrating Christ's character? What actions do you need to take to more faithfully live according to His standards?***

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***What can you do to remind other believers of the responsibility to live as salt and light? How is your life an example for others to follow? List actions you need to take to encourage others in word and deed.***

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***As a group, evaluate on a scale of 1 to 5 how well your group demonstrates each of the eight characteristics. Identify the one needing the most attention in your group and develop a plan for improving the demonstration of that characteristic within the group.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. —Matthew 5:14



Session 6

## APPROACHING THE KING

Jesus taught His followers how to approach the Father through prayer.

### MATTHEW 6:5-18

<sup>5</sup> “Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people. I assure you: They’ve got their reward! <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup> When you pray, don’t babble like the idolaters, since they imagine they’ll be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Don’t be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask Him. <sup>9</sup> Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, Your name be honored as



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holy. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.] <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive people their wrongdoing, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. <sup>15</sup> But if you don't forgive people, your Father will not forgive your wrongdoing. <sup>16</sup> Whenever you fast, don't be sad-faced like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so their fasting is obvious to people. I assure you: They've got their reward! <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head, and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that you don't show your fasting to people but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

*Observe the various ways people approach God in prayer. Identify the attitudes God desires.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Have you watched a golfer prepare to hit a tee shot? The process can be an ordeal: Place the ball on the tee just so. Step away for a few warm-up swings. Take a comfortable position over the ball. Plant the feet the appropriate distance apart. Concentrate on the ball. Take a mighty yet controlled swing. An explosive connection between club head and ball sends the ball soaring down the fairway. The actual union of club and ball lasts a split second. The preparation necessary to hit the ball properly, however, takes longer.

***What kind of activities do you engage in that require extensive preparation to make the activity productive? What happens when you take a shortcut in your approach to an activity?***

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Jesus taught His disciples the proper approach necessary to connect with God in prayer. He did not offer this information as a set formula for effective prayer. We are not required to use only Jesus' words when praying. In fact, Jesus insisted that prayer originate from the heart. Prayer, then, involves a personal interaction between a believer and the Father. The discipline of prayer requires a humble, reverent approach to God.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### MATTHEW 6:1-34

Matthew 6 stands at the heart of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The proper motivation of a Christian in the practice of faith is the focus of verses 1-18. Jesus focused on three areas of spiritual life: giving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-15), and fasting (vv. 16-18). Verse 1 sets the tone for the first 18 verses: "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of people, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." When God's people engage in religious activities, they should not do them to call attention to themselves but rather to glorify God. A good test to which believers should subject every outward expression of faith would be to ask, "If no one ever knew that I did this, would I still do it?"

Verses 19-34 examine priorities. Jesus called for a right relationship between believers and material things. Material things threaten allegiance to God. Christians cannot have two masters. A person can treasure either God or money, but not both. Jesus summed up the section by calling on His followers to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### BETWEEN HIM AND US (MATT. 6:5-6)

#### VERSE 5

**<sup>5</sup> "Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people. I assure you: They've got their reward!"**



Prayer was an important part of Jewish religious life. Not only had the Jews been given God's written Word, God had also communicated directly with Abraham and many of his descendants, and they had felt free to speak to Him. This created the foundation for a direct communication with God in prayer. But some had allowed the privilege of prayer to be corrupted by rituals and man-made traditions.

Many religious leaders, wanted to appear holy and pious before the people. They would stand and pray ***in the synagogues and on the street corners***. No doubt some of the people hearing them were impressed by their apparent spirituality and may even have complimented them for it. Jesus called these people ***hypocrites*** (pretenders) and said that praise from people would be their only reward. Sadly, they had prayed only to impress those around them.

#### VERSE 6

**<sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

After telling His disciples how not to pray, Jesus gave them a simple formula for effective prayer. He had just dealt with hypocritical public prayer. Jesus was not, however, condemning public prayer. Public prayer was important to the early church and, when expressed in the proper spirit, is equally important in corporate worship today. Public prayer can nurture unity within a body of believers.

In this instance, however, Jesus was pointing out the importance of private prayer. The ***private room*** Jesus suggested could be a small, closet-like room where one could escape the normal noise and activity of the day. In the secret place of prayer, the needs we share are for God's ears and not for others to hear. During those quiet times we are impressed with the certainty that God has heard us and will answer in accordance with His will.

***Why is private prayer preferred to public prayer in this passage? How would you define the principle Jesus was teaching?***

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## HONEST COMMUNICATION (MATT. 6:7-8)

### VERSE 7

**<sup>7</sup> When you pray, don't babble like the idolaters, since they imagine they'll be heard for their many words.**

Prayers that amounted to a meaningless repetition of words and phrases were common among many pagan religions in Jesus' day. These pagans would work themselves up into a state of hysteria, thinking that the gods to whom they prayed would more readily hear them.

Some of the hypocrites to whom Jesus referred may have used repetition in their public praying to gain attention. Others simply had no clue as to what true communication with God meant. They thought they needed to flood God with *many words* or repeated formulas to get His attention.

Some well-meaning Christians today may think that repeating certain phrases over and over will somehow move God to act on their behalf. Genuine prayer does not seek to manipulate God. God responds to the righteous heart in sincere prayer, not to those who utter empty words.

### VERSE 8

**<sup>8</sup> Don't be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask Him.**

Jesus' statement that *your Father knows the things you need before you ask Him* poses something of a mystery concerning prayer. To begin with, we must understand that prayer is not a means whereby we inform God about our needs. Why, then, are we exhorted to pray if God already knows what we need and is able to meet those needs? Actually, when we pray, we are admitting to God our inability to meet our own needs. When we pray from the heart, we are exercising our faith and expressing our dependence on God. Just because God already knows what we need does not mean that we are not to spread those needs out before Him in prayer. However, for us to repeat those needs to Him again and again may be evidence of a lack of faith that God is listening to us and a belief that He must be cajoled or badgered into coming to our aid.



***Do you find yourself using the same words or phrases often in your prayers? How might you go about freshening up your prayers by limiting the use of tired, worn-out phrases?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use a Bible dictionary (either print or online version) to research religious practices mentioned in Scripture.*

The Jews of the first century placed a major emphasis on religious practices such as fasting and prayer. Read articles about fasting and prayer in a Bible dictionary. Give attention to the origins of those practices in Judaism and how the use of them changed over time.

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## **RESPECTFULLY REQUESTED** (MATT. 6:9-15)

### **VERSES 9-10**

**<sup>9</sup> Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, Your name be honored as holy. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

Prayer played a major role in Jesus' earthly life. He prayed with His disciples but also spent much time alone in prayer. The disciples were aware of Jesus' prayer habits, and one of them said to Him one day, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). He gave them a simple but comprehensive prayer outline as a model. He did not specify a time, a place, or even one's posture, whether standing, kneeling, looking up with outstretched hands, or with a bowed head. Prayer is appropriate any time, any place, and under any circumstance.

This model prayer has two parts. First, it addresses God's glory (vv. 9-10). Second, it considers people's need (vv. 11-13a). Jesus combined praise for a majestic and awesome God (*in heaven*) with

a loving and approachable God (*our Father*). His name is *holy* and to be honored above all other names. God's ultimate purpose is for His *kingdom* to be established on earth so that His *will* might be accomplished. This implies the total surrender of our will to the perfect will of God.

***What commitments are seen in how God is addressed? What commitments should be made when approaching God with a request?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom***

Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth.

#### **VERSES 11-12**

**<sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

Jesus had our personal needs in mind in these two verses. Jesus taught the disciples to pray: ***Give us today our daily bread.*** In the first century, people had no way to store food for long periods. Workers typically were paid daily and went immediately to buy the family's food for the next day.

The word *daily* is a reminder that God already knows what we need and that we should not worry about it (v. 8). The Greek word translated *daily* appears only here in the New Testament and is rich in meaning. It points to God's provision for each day, reminding us of the daily falling of manna for the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 16:15-26). The word also points to what we need to survive each day. Our continual need for bread is comparable to our daily need for God.

The word translated ***debts*** in verse 12 is one of several New Testament words for sin. Jesus was not saying that God's forgiveness of our sin is dependent on our willingness to ***forgive*** others. Rather, those who understand the greatness of God's forgiveness that they



have received should gladly extend forgiveness to those who have wronged them. Jesus expanded on this in verses 14-15.

***What is the relationship between receiving (in which God provides and forgives) and giving (in which we meet needs and forgive others)?***

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### VERSES 13-15

**<sup>13</sup> And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.] <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive people their wrongdoing, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. <sup>15</sup> But if you don't forgive people, your Father will not forgive your wrongdoing.**

We know that God allows temptation. We saw in a recent session (session 4) that Jesus Himself was tempted (Matt. 4:1-10). Yet God Himself is never the author of temptation. James warns us: "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God.' For God is not tempted by evil, and He Himself doesn't tempt anyone" (Jas. 1:13). The sense of Jesus' teaching in verse 13 may be, "don't let us surrender to temptation."

God may allow us to be tested by temptation, but His testing is always for a purpose. All believers struggle with temptations, but we have this promise in His Word: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity. God is faithful, and He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide a way of escape so that you are able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

The closing doxology in verse 13 declares God's preeminence as reflected in His eternal kingdom, as well as His absolute power and His glory worthy of our praise.<sup>16</sup> **Whenever you fast, don't be sad-faced like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so their fasting is obvious to people. I assure you: They've got their reward!**<sup>17</sup> **But when you fast, put oil on your head, and wash your face,**<sup>18</sup> **so that you don't show your fasting to people but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."**

The religious leaders had been hypocritical in their giving, in their praying, and in the way they viewed and practiced fasting. Having dealt already with giving and praying, Jesus now addressed the practice of fasting.

Fasting is modeled in the New Testament. Jesus Himself fasted (Matt. 4:2). Paul fasted (Acts 9:9), and the early church fasted (Acts 13:2). Fasting is a valuable spiritual discipline when we do it to focus our minds on God and to seek a deeper prayer experience with Him.

The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), on Mondays and Thursdays, but for all the wrong reasons. Instead of using these fasting days as times for genuine prayer and personal heart-searching, they saw them as opportunities to impress people with their piety and spirituality. No doubt this sickened Jesus, and He told His disciples that these Pharisees need not expect any divine reward for what they were doing. By gaining the notice of people, they had their reward already. Jesus clearly expected His disciples to fast, but He was warning them against doing it to parade their holiness before others.

While most of us think of fasting in terms of going without food for 24 hours, fasting could also be done by going without a meal one day a week. There is more than one way to practice the discipline of fasting. The most important thing about fasting is to do it for the right reasons, not from a selfish desire for praise.

***How can fasting be used and misused in a Christian's life? How could a person fast in practical ways without it being known? What are some life experiences in which fasting could be helpful?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

When we pray, we are to approach God with reverence and humility. Prayer is to be viewed as a conversation with the holy God for the purpose of understanding His heart and will. We must examine our motives for praying and fasting, looking for prideful and self-righteous attitudes.



Identify the steps you take to prepare yourself to approach God in prayer. What changes do you need to make in light of this passage?

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Evaluate your motives behind your prayer habits. How do your prayer requests reflect the prayer presented by Jesus? What do you need to add to your prayer list so that you are in line with the example given by Jesus?

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Discuss with the group how the principles discovered in this passage can be followed by the group. List actions the group needs to take to maintain a proper prayer life.

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## MEMORY VERSE

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. —Matthew 6:33





## Session 7

# CARRYING HIS VALUES

Jesus values all human life and expects His followers to do the same.

## MATTHEW 5:17-22,43-45

<sup>17</sup> “Don’t assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches people to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>21</sup> You have heard that it was



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said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. <sup>22</sup> But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Fool!’ will be subject to the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, ‘You moron!’ will be subject to hellfire. [...] <sup>43</sup> You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

*Identify words or phrases that point to the value of a person. Look for any relationships between these words and phrases.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Hippocrates, known as the father of medicine, lived in ancient Greece. Many medical schools issue to their students a modern version of an oath attributed to Hippocrates. The modern Hippocratic Oath contains a sentence that reads, “I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person’s family and economic stability.”

This statement reminds physicians that they treat people, not diseases. Good physicians value life. Valuing human life is also a Christian duty.

*What are some ways in which you see life devalued in the present culture? What are some specific ways Christians can place a proper emphasis on the value of life?*

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Jesus lifted up the value of human life. His defense of life grew out of the truth that God created humans in His image. Thus God values

people above all other creation. Life, as God's gift, should be treated with care and respect.

The Scripture passage for this week highlights the higher standard to which Jesus calls His followers. Jesus called for a new kind of behavior that values life in the same way God does. Expect Him to expand your perspective about the value of human life through your study.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 5:17-48**

Jewish religious leaders of the first century stressed legalistic obedience to the letter of the law; Jesus pointed to the intent behind the law. In this passage He provided six illustrations of the law's intent (vv. 21-48). He followed the same formula with each one: stating an Old Testament command then affirming God's intent in that law. First was the law against murder (vv. 21-26). God intended that believers avoid not only the physical act of murder but also anger and hatred, the root causes of murder. Jesus then addressed the command concerning adultery. He said the law intended not only to address the physical act of adultery but also the lustful thoughts that caused adultery (vv. 27-30). Jesus likewise addressed the laws related to divorce (vv. 31-32), oaths (vv. 33-37), and retaliation (vv. 38-42). Finally, Jesus explained the intent of the command to love your neighbor (vv. 43-48). Again, He called for an above-and-beyond attitude to love not only your neighbor but your enemy as well.

In this passage Jesus was pointing His followers to a higher standard of righteousness than that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20). The religious leaders of His day had lost the high view of the dignity of human life that God's law emphasized. A basic attitude of selfishness and an unholy sense of pride had seized them.

In the clearest of terms, Jesus laid out the spirit with which His followers were to approach a lost and sinful world. That spirit would demonstrate a redemptive love that would draw people to Christ. He taught us, by example, that it is possible to love sinners without condoning their sin.



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## LOOK TO THE SCRIPTURES (MATT. 5:17-20)

### VERSES 17-18

<sup>17</sup> “Don’t assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished.

*The Law or the Prophets* was a reference to all the Old Testament Scripture. Apparently, Jesus had been accused of defying Old Testament Scripture. He told His listeners, in no uncertain terms, **don’t assume** that He had come to **destroy** the Law and the Prophets; rather, He came to **fulfill** them. Jesus used a strong word for *destroy* that meant to utterly overthrow or tear down. Instead, He came to *fulfill* the law, or to bring out the full meaning of the Scripture, showing that He was the fulfillment of all it prophesied. Thus He would bring the Old Testament promises to their completion.

Jesus used the phrase **I assure you** on other occasions, signaling that what He was about to say was of vital significance. Here He was ascribing the highest authority to God’s law. Not only did Jesus fulfill the law, but until the end of the age nothing in God’s law would change. The word **until** introduced two unchangeable facts: God’s Word is eternally true, and it will stand until the total plan of God is accomplished. Then, to further strengthen the eternal significance of the law, Jesus said that **not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter** would disappear from the written law of God until its purpose was completed. The *smallest letter* meant the smallest letter of the alphabet. The *stroke of a letter* referred to the smallest extension or ornamental flourish attached to a letter in the alphabet. Jesus affirmed all of Scripture. The Old Testament remained authoritative even after Jesus came. His teachings and the New Testament fulfilled God’s revelation begun in the Old Testament.

**Based on these words of Jesus, how would you describe His concept of the inspiration of the Word of God? Why is it important to believe in the total inspiration of the Scriptures?**

**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

Jesus said that He fulfilled “the Law or the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17). Read Matthew 1:22-23; 2:15; and 4:14-16. How do these passages affirm Jesus as fulfiller of the Old Testament?

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**VERSES 19-20**

**<sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches people to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**

After Jesus told His disciples that He would fulfill and accomplish the entire Law and the Prophets, He stressed that His followers were also to practice and teach the commandments. No one has the right to alter or do away with any of God’s laws. Jesus underscored the grave responsibility that those who teach God’s commands must bear. If they do not practice what they teach, they will be called ***least in the kingdom of heaven***, whereas those who faithfully practice what they teach will be recognized as ***great in the kingdom of heaven***.

The Pharisees were satisfied if they appeared to obey the commandments outwardly. They did not humble themselves before God, asking Him to change their hearts or attitudes. True followers of Christ know that they cannot make themselves righteous enough to enter the kingdom of heaven. Instead, they depend on God to work His righteousness within them. Consequently, their ***righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees*** because it is based on a relationship with God. The only way believers can have a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees is to trust Christ in salvation.



***What is wrong with the opinion that salvation is achieved and maintained through the keeping of God's law? How does self-righteousness differ from the righteousness God desires to see in the lives of His people?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *The Christian and the Social Order***

Christians should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.

### **VALUE HUMAN LIFE (MATT. 5:21-22)**

#### **VERSE 21**

***21 You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment.***

In this verse Jesus stated the first of six examples of a surpassing righteousness that fulfills the law. Each example begins with a statement such as “You have heard that it was said.” From the time the first murder was committed (see Gen. 4:8), murder has been a recurring blot on the pages of human history. Murders have become so commonplace that unless they are bizarre or multiple or involve some famous person, they are hardly more than local news. If we add to these numbers the suicides (self-murders) and abortions (pre-birth murders), the totals are staggering.

Jesus dealt plainly and openly with the sin of murder. He quoted the sixth commandment, ***Do not murder*** (see Ex. 20:13). The term translated *murder* meant “to kill or take a life wrongfully.” Jews considered murder a grave sin. They excluded from the law what they considered justifiable killing. Killing in self-defense, just war, capital punishment, and accident fit that category. The phrase ***whoever murders will be subject to judgment*** was not part of the Ten Commandments but accurately summarizes the Old Testament regulation. Those accused of murder were to be taken before a judge; the penalty was death (see Ex. 21:12; Lev. 24:17).



## How does verse 21 speak to the issue of abortion?

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### VERSE 22

**<sup>22</sup> But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Fool!’ will be subject to the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, ‘You moron!’ will be subject to hellfire.**

Jesus was not nullifying the Old Testament commandment when He said, **But I tell you**. Rather, He was giving a clearer understanding of the true intent of God’s law. He went beyond the physical act of murder to the root cause of it.

The Pharisees felt righteous because they had not literally killed anyone. They would become angry enough at Jesus to plot His death but leave the dirty work of crucifying Him to the Romans. Jesus was saying that murder is an act that begins in the heart when another person is devalued. The sin is in the devaluing as well as in the physical act of murder.

Murder is a terrible sin, of course, but anger is also high on the list of grievous sins because it violates God’s command to love. The anger Jesus referred to here describes a seething, brooding bitterness against one’s **brother**, which could mean a fellow believer.

There is a time and place for righteous anger, but the anger Jesus describes here is not righteous. This is anger directed toward a *brother*, and it issues forth from an attitude of scornful contempt toward another person. This is evidenced in the terms **“Fool!”** and *fool* (*raca*) typically meant “empty-headed or stupid.” The word *moron* (*mora*) meant “scoundrel” and was an attack on a person’s character.

**Subject to judgment** here involves divine judgment, not to a human court as referred to in the previous verse. Ugly, inappropriate name-calling used to insult a fellow believer reveals a heart far out of tune with God. Such people, Jesus said, were **subject to hellfire**. The term *hellfire* is literally “the gehenna of fire.” Gehenna is derived from the Valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where children had been sacrificed on a fiery altar before the pagan god Molech



(see 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; Jer. 7:31; 32:35). Jews later used the place as a garbage dump, where tradition says fire burned continually. *Gehenna* is used as a term for hell in the New Testament (Mark 9:43,45,47-48). Hell is the place where fire will never be quenched, prepared for the Devil and his angels and for those who have rejected Christ (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:9-10).

In verse 22 Jesus identified an issue that damages not only relationships between people but between people and God. Jesus' end game was to heighten regard for human life.

***How are anger and regard for human life connected?***

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## **LOVE BEYOND EXPECTATIONS** (MATT. 5:43-45)

### **VERSE 43**

**<sup>43</sup> You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.**

Many hymns in our church extol God's love. John 3:16, perhaps the most familiar verse in the Bible, reminds us that God's love is so great and inclusive that it reaches out to all people, regardless of their sin and rebellion against God. As children of God, we are to reflect the kind of love that God manifests in the world.

Jesus reminded His disciples of this sacred admonition: "Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am Yahweh" (Lev. 19:18). The Pharisees, however, had interpreted that statement as referring only to those who love in return. Of course, they defined ***neighbor*** as someone of the same nationality and faith. A Samaritan or other foreigner did not fit their definition of neighbor. No Bible verse says to ***hate your enemy***. This was something the scribes added later. It appeared reasonable to them that the corollary of loving one's neighbors is to hate those who are not one's neighbors. Additions such as this to the law made it less burdensome. But they missed the spirit of the law. Jesus excluded hatred of anyone.

***How do you relate to a person who holds different political, philosophical,***

***or religious views from yours? How do you maintain a warm relationship with a fellow believer with whom you differ in spiritual matters?***

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#### **VERSES 44-45**

**<sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”**

The true intent of God’s law was to challenge His people to love their enemies as well as their neighbors. Jesus modeled this kind of love. On the cross He prayed for the forgiveness of His accusers and tormentors. The only way to love an enemy is to love the way Jesus loved.

On one occasion an expert in the law came to Jesus and asked Him, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus identified the two greatest commands, namely loving God with all one’s heart and loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Then He related the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jews held Samaritans in great disregard because they had violated their Jewish identity by intermarrying with non-Jews. Jesus’ intent in the parable was to show that God’s people were to love all kinds of people, no matter what their nationality or race.

These words of Jesus must have shocked His audience, for they probably had never heard such positive and forceful words spoken regarding loving one’s enemies. We show the lordship of Jesus in our lives when we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Jesus’ use of the phrase ***your Father in heaven*** may have been His way of showing God’s indiscriminating love to all people. God allows ***His sun to rise on the evil and the good*** and He sends ***rain on the righteous and the unrighteous***. This is sometimes called common grace, meaning that God is indiscriminate in His benevolence. His divine providence and love, in some form, touches everyone, even those who rebel against Him and His truth. Jesus’ implied teaching was that, as children of the Heavenly Father, we are called to reflect



His character by showing love for all people. This admonition would also apply to a church regarding its willingness to reach out inclusively to all kinds of people. We can love people without condoning their sin.

## IN MY CONTEXT

Jesus calls His followers to live to a higher standard. We demonstrate God's standard by refusing to devalue human life. Jesus' followers can be redemptive by loving all people, even those who oppose Him and His followers.

***What are some ways you can challenge your Bible study group to strive toward a higher standard of righteousness than that reflected by the world today? What agreements need to be made between the group members to accomplish this? Discuss these agreements as a group and establish a group agreement.***

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***Consider ways you can demonstrate the healing and restoring power of God's grace to individuals who have experienced an abortion. Read Lecrae's story at <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lecrae-confesses-abortion-invites-others-into-the-light>.***

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***List the group or groups of people that are the hardest for you to love. Analyze the factors that contribute to this difficulty. Ask God to help you love this group or groups. Write your prayer here.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. —Matthew 5:44



Session 8

## TWO PATHS, ONE CHOICE

Every person faces an important choice regarding his or her eternal destiny.

### MATTHEW 7:13-21,24-27

<sup>13</sup> “Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. <sup>14</sup> How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it. <sup>15</sup> Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves. <sup>16</sup> You’ll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut



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down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> So you'll recognize them by their fruit. <sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. [...] <sup>24</sup> Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. <sup>26</sup> But everyone who hears these words of Mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. And its collapse was great!"

*Notice the common factors in the two houses. How do the similarities magnify the differences?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

The reality of choices is a fact of life. A couple eating out must choose between chicken or fish for their entrée, not to mention whether to opt for a dessert. The teenage daughter dressing for an important date must decide between everyday casual or evening wear. People taking prescription medicines sometimes have to decide between generics or name brands. A family programming a GPS for a vacation trip must decide between the shortest route and the scenic route. Of course, many daily alternatives may not matter greatly, since the consequences are not serious or long-lasting either way. However, some choices matter greatly.

*What was one of the most challenging and consequential choices you had to make in the past few weeks between two or more alternatives?*

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Jesus set forth several serious choices toward the end of His Sermon on the Mount. He presented the choice between two roads with different entrances and destinations. He followed with another alternative between two kinds of fruit that serve as indicators of the quality of the trees that produced them. He ended with a choice between foundations on which to build a house. Each of these sets of choices carry crucial consequences for our lives.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 7:1-29**

Jesus issued a series of commands in the sermon's conclusion. In Matthew 7:1-5, He commanded, "Do not judge." In verse 6, He commanded His followers to be discerning with what is sacred and precious. He followed with the familiar command in verses 7-11 that people should be persistent in prayer. In verse 12, He gave the command about practicing what we call the Golden Rule.

Like the sermon as a whole, the point in this passage is not so much about how a person enters God's kingdom as it is about how those who have entered it should live as kingdom citizens. In the middle of this section, Jesus spoke about entering the kingdom in terms of its gate, its way, its population, and its destination. He highlighted these features by describing the alternative gate, way, population, and destination (vv. 13-14).

In a warning about false prophets (vv. 15-23), Jesus pointed to the quality of a prophet's life as his credentials. Eloquence, persuasiveness, attractive personalities, popular followings, and powerful deeds are not the best indicators of genuine spokespersons for God. In putting the focus on a prophet's manner of life, Jesus introduced another contrast, one between good fruit and bad fruit.

Jesus ended the sermon in verses 24-27 by contrasting people who merely hear His words with those who not only hear them but put them into practice. A world of difference exists between hearing truth and practicing truth. The sermon's impact is given in verses 28-29. The crowds perceived that Jesus spoke with uncommon authority.



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## NARROW VERSUS WIDE? (MATT. 7:13-14)

### VERSE 13

**<sup>13</sup> “Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it.**

As Jesus began to conclude His sermon, He likened the choice facing His hearers to the choice between a *narrow gate* or a *wide* gate. Before describing the better way of the narrow gate, He wanted people to understand clearly where the alternative path leads. He termed the destination lying at the end of the *broad* road as *destruction*. We are not to think of *destruction* as annihilation or ceasing to exist. Rather, this word translates a term that has the basic meaning of suffering loss. The end of a life lived on the broad and popular road is the loss of all that is good and valuable—loss of joy and fulfillment in eternity. In Matthew 16:26, Jesus spoke about the poor judgment of gaining the world but losing one’s own life. The easy, broad way is the most popular way. The way that seems right to the majority is in fact the way to death (see Prov. 14:12).

### VERSE 14

**<sup>14</sup> How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.**

In the previous verse, Jesus described the way beyond the wide gate as a broad road. In this verse He described the way beyond the *narrow* gate. The word *difficult* in this verse comes from a verb meaning to experience trouble. Jesus wants His followers to know that the way of a disciple is demanding, not easy. It requires discipline and dedication. Its difficult demands cause it to be the choice of the *few*, not the many. However, the end of the difficult path makes it all worthwhile. It leads not to destruction or loss, but to *life*.

This passage speaks to us about the initial decision to reject all other imagined ways to begin the Christian life in favor of faith in Christ alone. Furthermore, the passage speaks to us about the disciplined and demanding life that continues to make daily, self-denying choices in order to live in obedience to Jesus’ commands.

***How might Jesus' words impact the way we view our family members, friends, and coworkers? Is there a qualitative difference between the way we live our lives and the way they live their lives?***

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### **GOOD VERSUS BAD? (MATT. 7:15-21)**

Jesus issued a warning about people masquerading as heralds of truth. His warning formed the context for introducing the imagery of good and bad trees, along with their respective fruit.

#### **VERSES 15-16**

**<sup>15</sup> Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves.<sup>16</sup> You'll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?**

Jesus drew a vivid picture of *ravaging wolves* disguised as sheep. Inside the innocent appearance of *sheep's clothing* lurked a wolf bent on living up to its nature by devouring its prey. Jesus warned His hearers that *false prophets* often come in disarming disguises. As peddlers of error, false prophets can cause immeasurable havoc among God's flock. It is a warning that should be taken in every generation and in all places.

In verse 16 Jesus alerted His hearers that false prophets can be recognized by *their fruit*. God's people must ask, "What is the outcome of a self-styled prophet's work? Does he leave people better than he found them? Does his message promote godliness in the hearers' lives? Does he teach God's truth? Does his private life match his public declarations?" Jesus' message is the same now as it was then: make a careful inspection of the fruit of the prophet's life, message, and motives.

To underscore His point, Jesus asked two agriculture-related questions, the answer to which should be obvious to everyone:

***Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?***

The implied answer indicates that just as false prophets do not themselves demonstrate Christlike lives, those who buy into their false teachings also do not bring forth crops of Christlike deeds.



***What is the responsibility of believers when they observe others producing fruit contrary to what the Bible expects of Christians?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use other Scripture passages to help understand a Bible passage.*

In Matthew 7:16-20 Jesus provided the basis by which a believer can discern a true and false prophet: Does the prophet bear good fruit? Several Old Testament texts provide further explanation. Read Jeremiah 23:13 and Deuteronomy 18:21-22. What additional insights do these passages contribute to our understanding of how to discern true and false prophets?

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**VERSES 17-18**

**<sup>17</sup> In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree can't produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit.**

Jesus' illustration from nature moved from thornbushes and thistles to fruit trees. He used language that people who lived in a largely agricultural setting would immediately understand. ***Every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit.*** All other factors being equal, the quality of the tree dictates the quality of its fruit.

Jesus went on to observe that the reverse is also true. ***A good tree can't produce bad fruit,*** nor will a ***bad tree produce good fruit.*** Diseased fruit trees produce flawed fruit. Jesus' point related to His warning about false prophets. A true prophet will produce good fruit both in his own life and in his hearers' lives. A false prophet will most likely be flawed in his own life and will reproduce his flaws in others.

When it comes to discerning false teachers, which would you deem most valuable as your safeguard: (1) Studying false religions in order to become well-acquainted with their teachings, or (2) Studying the words of Jesus to know what He says in order to judge what others say against His words?

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Who are the teachers and spiritual leaders to whom you entrust your mind and heart? How do their lives show the genuine fruit of obedience?

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#### VERSES 19-20

**<sup>19</sup> Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> So you'll recognize them by their fruit.**

What is true of fruit trees and false prophets is also true of the rest of us. Our true nature is revealed in the manner of our living. The quality of our hearts shows up in our attitudes, words, and deeds. All of us face the alternative possibilities of either being good and thus doing good or being bad and thus doing bad. People whose lives are characterized by ungodly acts and attitudes are simply revealing the condition of their hearts.

God knows who the pretenders are, so it is a doomed strategy to play at being a Christian. One day the outer layer will be stripped away and every heart will be laid bare before God. All the pretenders will ultimately be exposed for their lack of genuine fruit. Bad trees face a bad destiny. Jesus said they will be **cut down and thrown into the fire**. The Bible is honest about a final destiny in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-15).

True believers are not perfect, but their hearts have been changed by God's forgiving love. Consequently, we grieve when we fall short and soon find our way to a time of confession and cleansing. Pretenders most likely do not care that they are not genuine, but genuine Christians will always care when they sin.



## VERSE 21

**21 Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven.**

Jesus clearly widened the point of reference from false prophets to everyone. He declared that **everyone** whose claim to be Christian is nothing more than a matter of outward appearances and empty words will find themselves outsiders to **the kingdom of heaven**. Some may even say all the right words, like, **“Lord, Lord!”** However, Jesus declared that genuineness is determined by the manner of a person’s life, not by his or her vocabulary. The crucial test for kingdom citizens is the doing of the Lord’s will, not the speaking of His name.

While God knows directly and immediately those who are His genuine children, others can know it only by what they observe in a person’s life. Deeds demonstrate genuine faith. The inner person is revealed through outward conduct. So good fruit matters. It matters eternally, not as the means of securing salvation, but as the proof of being genuine believers in the Savior.

## KEY DOCTRINE: *Judgment*

According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness.

## ROCK VERSUS SAND? (MATT. 7:24-27)

Jesus compared the choice facing His hearers with the building of a house on sand or on rock. The point of His warning is about building one’s life on anything other than Him and His word.

## VERSES 24-25

**24 Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on the rock.**

**25 The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn’t collapse, because its foundation was on the rock.**



In describing the **sensible man**, Jesus meant a person's spiritual condition as opposed to the person's intellectual capacity. Ordinary wisdom would have dictated the need for a solid foundation for a house. Spiritual wisdom should dictate the need for building one's life on the solid rock of Christ. Jesus indicated that spiritual wisdom has two dimensions—hearing His word and acting on it. The absence of such wisdom results only in hearing His word but stops short of acting on it.

Using the forces of nature as indicative of divine judgment, Jesus pointed out that falling **rain**, rising **rivers**, and pounding **winds** cannot destroy the house that rests on a solid foundation.

#### VERSES 26-27

**26 But everyone who hears these words of Mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.**

**27 The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. And its collapse was great!"**

Jesus proceeded to give the alternative part of His analogy by referring to a house builder who chose **sand** for his foundation. He described such a builder as **foolish**, lacking spiritual discernment and therefore making unwise choices when presented with the truth about Jesus.

Using the identical description of nature's forces, Jesus described the collapse of the foolish builder's house when confronted with heavy rain, flooding rivers, and raging winds. He not only described the ruin as a collapse but called it a **great** collapse. Given the serious nature of the outcomes connected to how a person responds to Christ and His word, refusing to hear and act on revealed truth is nothing short of a great calamity.

***How do the images used by Jesus help you grasp His message? What do the images of an unfruitful tree and a destroyed house communicate? What do the images of a fruitful tree and a surviving house communicate?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Trusting in Jesus is the only way we can obtain real life. We will be held accountable for the life we live and the legacy we leave. Building one's life on anything other than Jesus leads to destruction—a destruction with devastating and eternal consequences.

***Do you know of anyone who is wrestling with the important choice regarding his or her eternal destiny? If so, what actions might you take that will help them opt for the right choice?***

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***Having entered the narrow gate into God's kingdom, what possible choices do you face in seeking to live a disciplined, committed life as you continue on the narrow road of godly devotion to Christ and His work? List actions you will take to stay on the right path.***

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***Share ways your Bible study group might minister in a positive and loving way to members who seem to be drifting away or those who are giving evidence of bearing fruit unbecoming for genuine Christ followers.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." —John 14:6



## Session 9

# FAITH DEMONSTRATED

Jesus has authority over all His creation.

## MATTHEW 8:5-13

<sup>5</sup> When He entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, <sup>6</sup> “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible agony!” <sup>7</sup> “I will come and heal him,” He told him. <sup>8</sup> “Lord,” the centurion replied, “I am not worthy to have You come under my roof. But only say the word, and my servant will be cured.

<sup>9</sup> For I too am a man under authority, having soldiers under my command. I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes; and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.”

<sup>10</sup> Hearing this, Jesus was amazed and said to those following Him, “I assure you: I have not found anyone in Israel with so great



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a faith! <sup>11</sup> I tell you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>12</sup> But the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” <sup>13</sup> Then Jesus told the centurion, “Go. As you have believed, let it be done for you.” And his servant was cured that very moment.

*Observe how the centurion’s understanding of Roman military authority informed his faith in Jesus’ authority.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

A clearly recognized chain of command lies at the organizational heart of military life. The chain of command works due to the pervasive recognition of authority. The authority flows from the top down. Various symbols of authority include gestures like snapping to attention in the presence of one’s superior and offering a crisp salute. Recognition of authority can be heard in the language that carefully addresses those of higher rank with “Yes, sir” or “No, sir.” Authority is also demonstrated by stripes on a uniform. Recognition of authority makes the machinery of the military run smoothly when commands are given and obeyed.

*List examples of how a chain of command is seen in society. How do these chains help bring order to society?*

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Inherent authority resided in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. His authority found expression in commands that caused nature to obey, demons to flee, and illnesses to disappear. God’s extended authority resides in inspired Scripture, which reveals truth, evidences the Spirit’s breath in its origin, and has life-giving power when

received in heartfelt trust and lifelong obedience. Just as God's spoken word had authority to cause the creation of all things, so too does God's living Word, Jesus, have authority over all creation. Jesus' authority was clearly seen in His dealings with a Roman centurion's request that He intervene when a servant became paralyzed with his life in danger.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 8:1–9:34**

After the extended discourse that we know as the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of Matthew records a number of Jesus' miracles in chapters 8–9. In the sermon, Jesus taught with authority (7:28-29), while through miracles He demonstrated authority. The series of miracles begins with the healing of a man with a serious skin disorder (8:1-4). That miracle is followed by the one that forms the basis for this week's study, the healing of a centurion's servant (8:5-13). A third healing miracle occurred in the house of Peter, where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. The news of this miracle occasioned many others being brought to Him for His powerful touch (8:14-17).

Leaving Capernaum and crossing the Sea of Galilee with the disciples, Jesus extended His authority into the realm of nature. In the midst of a storm His word quieted the wind and the waves (8:23-27). Safely on the other side of the sea, Jesus used His authority to deliver a man from the domination of demons, the news of which resulted in a crowd gathering in a nearby town (8:28-34).

Crossing back over the sea to Capernaum, Jesus healed a paralytic while exercising His authority to forgive the man's sins (9:1-8). Subsequently, He healed a girl who was near death, and in the process, a woman who had suffered from bleeding for 12 years found healing when she touched Jesus' garment (9:18-26). Following these miracles, He restored sight to two blind men (9:27-31) and cast out a demon that had rendered a man unable to speak (9:32-34).

These accumulating testimonies to Jesus' authority in Matthew 8–9 culminated in His exercising authority as Lord of the harvest by calling on His followers to pray for additional laborers to engage in ministering to human needs (9:35-38).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## ASK WITH HUMILITY (MATT. 8:5-7)

### VERSES 5-6

**<sup>5</sup> When He entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, <sup>6</sup> “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible agony!”**

After coming down from the mountain where He gave the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7) and following the cleansing of a leper (8:1-4), Jesus **entered Capernaum**. At this stage of His public ministry, He had made Capernaum the home base for His work.

Upon Jesus’ return to the city, **a centurion** presented to Him the urgent news about a servant who was **paralyzed** and **in terrible agony**. A centurion was a commander in the Roman army. As the term suggests, such an officer was commander of a division of 100 men. In practice, the actual number likely varied. Devout Jews of that day would have looked on a centurion as ceremonially unclean because of his race and would have despised him because of his occupation, which served as a stark reminder of Rome’s domination of Israel.

This centurion demonstrated several commendable characteristics. The fact that he showed great concern for his servant suggests a man capable of genuine compassion for others. Being a man of authority himself, the centurion revealed his humility in approaching Jesus to ask for help. A Gentile possessing compassion and humility stands in marked contrast to most of the religious leaders who confronted Jesus. As we read their words, see their actions, and get glimpses of their attitude toward Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders usually come across as far less commendable than the centurion.

If we read the account of this incident in Luke 7:1-10, we notice some differences in the details recorded. With the trained interest of a physician, Luke included the fact that the centurion’s servant was at the point of death (Luke 7:2). Of even more significance is the information in Luke that the centurion sent a delegation of Jewish elders to request that Jesus come to the centurion’s residence and save the life of his servant. The elders pleaded with Jesus to meet the need, going so far as to commend the centurion for generosity in building a synagogue for the Jews (Luke 7:3-5). The building of a



Jewish synagogue by a Roman centurion was such an act of love that the Jewish elders attempted to help the man. Kindness has a way of building bridges wherever divisions separate people.

Since Matthew omits the request voiced by the Jewish elders, how might we understand this difference in details between the two accounts? Many take the approach that the centurion's request was relayed to Jesus by the elders with such fervor that it was as if the centurion was pleading his own case through them. This approach simply understands that Matthew omitted that detail in order to heighten the subsequent interchange between Jesus and the centurion. An alternative approach is to assume the elders were running interference for the centurion to determine if Jesus might be open to helping a Roman military man. Trailing behind the delegation, the centurion found such openness to his need that he then approached Jesus himself. Having received Jesus' promise to go to his house, we can envision the centurion taking Jesus at His word and leaving immediately to return to the side of his beloved servant, with an understanding that Jesus would come soon. However, finding the servant healed, the centurion sent friends to intercept Jesus and tell Him not to come.

In any case, the notable point is that a Roman centurion who possessed significant authority by virtue of his position humbled himself to ask help from Jesus. His humble request was rewarded by Jesus' immediate willingness to cross the divide between Jews and Gentiles by going to the centurion's home to heal the servant.

#### VERSE 7

**<sup>7</sup> “I will come and heal him,” He told him.**

Interestingly, the centurion did not plead for healing when he told Jesus about his servant's desperate condition, although this was most certainly his unvoiced desire. Perhaps he hoped that Jesus would detect from his tone and manner that he wanted Jesus to do something to relieve the servant's plight. More likely, the Jewish delegation had reported to the centurion Jesus' willingness to heal the servant, so another request for healing was unnecessary. Instead, the centurion simply expressed his deep concern and the servant's dire need of help. In any case, Jesus responded with a straightforward offer to go to the centurion's home and heal the servant.



Jesus demonstrated a total lack of prejudice against a Gentile who was part of the Roman occupation. Furthermore, He voiced a readiness to enter the Gentile's home, something the devout Jewish leaders would have refused to consider.

**What part of the verbal exchange between the centurion and Jesus gives the strongest evidence of the centurion's character?**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGE HIS AUTHORITY** (MATT. 8:8-9)

### **VERSE 8**

**<sup>8</sup> “Lord,” the centurion replied, “I am not worthy to have You come under my roof. But only say the word, and my servant will be cured.**

Once again, the centurion addressed Jesus as **Lord**. The Gentile soldier most likely used the term not in its theological meaning but as an expression of the kind of respect that a soldier would use in addressing a superior officer as *sir*. The centurion felt unworthy to have Jesus enter his house. In the Luke account, the delegation of Jewish elders pleaded for Jesus to help by praising the centurion, saying, “He is worthy for You to grant this” (Luke 7:4). The centurion seems to have been aware of the Jewish concern about ritual uncleanness, which formed a barrier that prevented a devout Jew from entering the house of a Gentile. In going to a Gentile's home, Jesus would be crossing religious and social barriers. A good outcome occurs whenever human need joins uncommon compassion to triumph over social traditions or to tear down long-standing barriers.

The centurion went a step beyond declaring his unworthiness by expressing his faith in Jesus' authority. He seemed somewhat reluctant to ask Jesus to enter his house and even deemed it unnecessary. He revealed his confidence that Jesus could heal from a distance with only His word. Given that no prior instance is recorded of Jesus healing from a distance, the centurion's faith was uncommonly strong.

### VERSE 9

**<sup>9</sup> For I too am a man under authority, having soldiers under my command. I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes; and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.”**

The centurion not only expressed faith in Jesus’ authority, but he also explained the basis for his confidence in Jesus. He compared Jesus’ ability to heal by His word to the authority residing in a military leader’s commands. The centurion knew what it was like to react to those who had authority over him and what it meant to have those under him recognize the authority in his own commands. He transferred that experience to this interaction with Jesus.

***What part of the centurion’s words spoken to Jesus most clearly revealed his confidence in Jesus’ authority?***

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### **BIBLE SKILL:** *Use other Scripture passages to help understand a Bible passage.*

To understand the fullness of Jesus’ authority, we should examine the passages where the Greek word for authority, *exousia*, is applied to Jesus. Read the following passages: Matthew 7:29; 10:1; 28:18; Mark 1:22,27; Luke 4:36; John 5:27; 10:18; Revelation 12:10. What additional insight do these passages reveal about Jesus’ authority?

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### **ANTICIPATE IN FAITH** (MATT. 8:10-13)

#### VERSE 10

**<sup>10</sup> Hearing this, Jesus was amazed and said to those following Him, “I assure you: I have not found anyone in Israel with so great a faith!”**



The centurion's insight about authority **amazed** Jesus, causing Him to compliment the man's **faith** and to call it **great**. This Gentile's faith surpassed the faith Jesus had found among the Jews. Jesus' amazement over finding that kind of faith in a Gentile soldier was such that He turned to the crowd and publicly commended the centurion's faith. Given Jesus' location, the crowd was presumably a Jewish following, making His comment about the centurion's faith an implied indictment of the lack of similar faith in Israel.

### KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom*

The Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

#### VERSE 11

**11 I tell you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus pointed to the centurion's faith as the kind of faith required to enter the kingdom of heaven. In doing so, Jesus gave advance notice concerning others who would come to Him with such faith. His prophetic word that **many will come from east and west** meant that many Gentiles would be included in God's kingdom.

Jesus used the imagery of sharing a meal with **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** to express the blessedness associated with inclusion in God's future kingdom. Jews would immediately associate the patriarchs with full participation in future blessedness. Anyone sharing table fellowship with them would be sharing their blessedness.

The words **recline at the table** expressed the usual posture of participants in a formal meal but also pointed to Gentiles' full and equal involvement in the future heavenly banquet of the Messiah. Noteworthy is the observation that the Gospel of Matthew, although written to a Jewish readership, pointed toward the future inclusion of Gentiles joining the Kingdom alongside believing Jews.

***Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: God's authority and ability remain intact even when our faith is lacking or imperfect? Explain.***

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**VERSE 12**

***12 But the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***

In contrast to the Gentiles' inclusion in the kingdom was the sad observation that Jews, who should have been first in line as ***the sons of the kingdom***, would face a destiny of ***outer darkness*** by choosing not to receive Jesus. The misery of missing God's kingdom is further described as going to a place where ***weeping and gnashing of teeth***—sounds of pain and distress—would dominate.

Jesus' pronouncement no doubt came across to His Jewish hearers as a shocking revelation. It would have seemed impossible to them that they could be excluded from God's kingdom. As descendants of Abraham, they relied on that ancestry as a guarantee of God's favor. God's favor, however, comes not by physical birth but by spiritual birth.

**VERSE 13**

***13 Then Jesus told the centurion, "Go. As you have believed, let it be done for you." And his servant was cured that very moment.***

Upon returning home, the centurion found his servant healed. The centurion's faith in Jesus' supreme authority was vindicated. Without ever entering the Gentile's house, the spoken word of Jesus had been effective. Healing had occurred in the ***very moment*** that Jesus had spoken His authoritative word.

***What part of Jesus' response to the centurion's words seems to have pointed to the future anticipation that believing Gentiles would be included in the reach of the gospel?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

When we approach God with a request, we are to do so with confidence in His authority and at the same time with humility. We must mark well that God's authority and ability are not dependent on our faith. Jesus' words remind us that faith in Him is the critical requirement for being a part of His kingdom.

***Do you think it is possible to make a bold request of God in faith and at the same time end the prayer with words like, "If it is your will"? Explain.***

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***How might your group respond to a person who, in the absence of healing after having prayed earnestly for it, now says, "I guess God could not perform a miracle because I do not have enough faith"? Develop a response as a group.***

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***Consider how this passage addresses the needs of people struggling with their past. What could you share from this passage that could help them understand that Jesus can give them a fresh start? List one person with whom you could share these insights.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Then Jesus told the centurion, "Go. As you have believed, let it be done for you." And his servant was cured that very moment.  
—Matthew 8:13





## Session 10

# IN HIS SERVICE

Jesus invites His followers to be a part of His work.

## MATTHEW 9:35-38; 10:1-8

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus went to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. <sup>36</sup> When He saw the crowds, He felt compassion for them, because they were weary and worn out, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” <sup>10:1</sup> Summoning His 12 disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to drive them out and to heal every disease and sickness. <sup>2</sup> These are the names of the 12 apostles: First,



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Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him. <sup>5</sup> Jesus sent out these 12 after giving them instructions: “Don’t take the road leading to other nations, and don’t enter any Samaritan town. <sup>6</sup> Instead, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, announce this: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>8</sup> Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, drive out demons. You have received free of charge; give free of charge.”

*Look for factors that prompted Jesus to instruct the disciples to pray for more workers.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

A father is on the ground reaching under the car. He is straining with all his might to loosen a bolt. His young son draws up next to him with an offer: “I wanna help.” A mother is mixing ingredients for a cake when her young daughter says, “I wanna help.” Such is a child’s desire to help grown-ups, without regard for whether he or she can perform a grown-up’s task. God’s work in the world is not child’s play. However, He is looking for believers who possess a childlike attitude of desiring to help with the work.

***What tasks beyond their ability have you observed children wanting to help complete? What kind of response befits a caring adult?***

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Jesus wanted the 12 disciples to be His helpers, but the task would be beyond their natural abilities. So He told them that divine help

would be available to them. When needed, the heavenly Father would help them know what to say. Not only that, but Jesus also told them they could help by praying for additional workers to join the task. On top of this, the Twelve had watched Jesus model the kind of work they would do. As was true of the Twelve, we also are commissioned by Jesus to join Him in His work. What is the level of our willingness to join Him in ministry to those around us?

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 9:35–10:42**

Matthew 9:35-38 serves as a summary passage that leads into chapter 10. The summary describes a season of Jesus' ministry in which He engaged in teaching, preaching, and healing throughout unnamed towns and villages.

Matthew 10 is the second extended discourse in Matthew, the first being the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7. In this second discourse Jesus commissioned and instructed the disciples to be workers in an understaffed harvest. They were to be extensions of His own ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing (10:1-10). After identifying and instructing the chosen twelve, He told them how to handle both acceptance and rejection in the places they ministered. He gave them advance notice about persecutions that would await them. However, when they were taken to task for what they were doing, He promised that their heavenly Father would supply them with proper responses (10:11-25).

Jesus encouraged the Twelve to face opposition without fear, since the worst that could happen to them would affect only the body, but not the soul. Since God placed high value on them, they could rely on Him to filter the persecutions that would touch them (10:26-31). Furthermore, Jesus encouraged them by explaining that His own mission in the world would involve stirring up opposition rather than bringing peace to those who chose not to acknowledge Him (10:32-39). His concluding note of encouragement for the disciples equated a welcoming reception of them to a welcoming of Him. The simplest of caring ministry to the people, even the offer of a cup of cold water, would bring lasting reward (10:40-42).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## MOTIVATED BY COMPASSION (MATT. 9:35-36)

### VERSE 35

**<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus went to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.**

Jesus ministered in *all the towns and villages*. He continued *teaching* in the *synagogues* and *preaching the good news of the kingdom*. We have two options in interpreting the report that Jesus healed *every disease and every sickness*, depending on whether the reference is to the number or type of healing miracles. As to number, we could understand that Jesus healed 100 percent of the physical needs He encountered. To be sure, He could certainly have done so and quite possibly did. We could also understand the reference to mean that He encountered and healed enough people that examples of every kind of disease and sickness had yielded to His authority. In either reading of the passage, Jesus' healing power is magnified.

### VERSE 36

**<sup>36</sup> When He saw the crowds, He felt compassion for them, because they were weary and worn out, like sheep without a shepherd.**

As Jesus ministered in the towns and villages, He perceived their spiritual condition to be comparable to *sheep without a shepherd*. Sheep without a shepherd would have become *weary and worn out* in their aimless wandering. Applying the analogy to the people He encountered, Jesus perceived that they lacked spiritual leadership, which was a reflection on the formal priesthood, along with the scribes and Pharisees. Without leaders that helped them understand God's truths and His provisions for purposeful and fulfilling lives, the people were living in a kind of aimless spiritual vacuum.

Jesus' compassion obviously was the driving motivation for His ongoing engagement with people and their needs. The observation that Jesus *felt compassion* is quite revealing. Another way of expressing what He felt is that He was "moved with compassion." The phrase renders a single Greek verb that is derived from a

term that commonly referred to inner bodily organs, such as the bowels and kidneys. We may well deduce that such was the depth of Jesus' compassion that He literally felt something of a physical, gut reaction. People often experience physical sensations in times of heightened emotions. An athlete might feel "butterflies" in the stomach while awaiting the kickoff of a football game or the impending firing of the starter's gun at a track meet. Jesus quite possibly felt a physical sensation when stirring concern for human needs arose as He moved among the people. In any case, His compassion was strong enough to stir Him to action and impel Him to involve the disciples in joining Him.

***What scenes move you to compassion? How do those scenes compare with what Jesus was observing?***

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## **CHALLENGED TO PRAY** (MATT. 9:37-38)

### **VERSE 37**

**<sup>37</sup> Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few.**

Jesus' compassion for the needs of people prompted Him to address the disciples about His concern. Changing from the analogy of sheep and shepherds, Jesus invoked that of a harvest and workers. He saw people with needs as a waiting harvest that needed reapers to join the work.

Given the range of needs Jesus encountered and the number of those needs, He could have felt despair. However, He saw the needs as ripe opportunities for ministry. Therein is an example for all of us. Almost overwhelming needs come to our attention from all corners of the globe, as well as many lying within the shadows of our own lives. We have the option to despair over the depth and breadth of the needs or to see them as opportunities to follow Jesus' example of caring and helping.

### **VERSE 38**

**<sup>38</sup> Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."**





As a first step, Jesus challenged his disciples to **pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers** to assist in His work. By identifying himself as *Lord of the harvest*, Jesus affirmed His deity.

Something in us wants to ask, *Why doesn't the Lord just go ahead and send forth added workers? Why wait on us to pray?* While the full answer may be bound up in God's own heart, we can discern a principle about prayer. God wants to do many things in our world but has determined that He will do so only in answer to believing prayer. In such a principle, can we not detect the honor He bestows on His children by making us partners with Him in blessing humanity? If this principle is valid, then much divine help for our needy world is awaiting our devotion to prayer.

***What is the impact on the person who prays for God to send harvesters? How can the answer be found in the one praying?***

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## COMMISSIONED TO GO (MATT. 10:1-8)

### CHAPTER 10, VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> Summoning His 12 disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to drive them out and to heal every disease and sickness.**

Jesus went beyond calling on the disciples to pray for additional workers. He commissioned them, sending them out to do the kinds of ministry He modeled before them. To equip them for the work to which He was sending them, Jesus bestowed on them **authority** to drive out **unclean spirits** and to **heal every disease and sickness**.

From what we read of the disciples' ministry after this occasion of being sent forth, it appears that the bestowal of authority for exorcisms and healings was not a permanent one. This leads to the possibility that the sharing of such authority was intended for the immediate mission to which Jesus was sending them. The other possibility is that the disciples could not exercise the authority at will but only by giving themselves to prayer and exercising personal faith. At a later time, when confronted with a man's son that was possessed with a demon, the disciples were powerless to cast out the demon.



When inquiring why they were unable to effect a deliverance, Jesus told them that their powerlessness was due to a lack of faith, as well as the absence of prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:20-21). Their authority for doing mighty works was not open-ended and not available to them on their own terms.

### **KEY DOCTRINE:** *Evangelism and Missions*

Missionary effort on the part of all rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ.

#### **VERSES 2-4**

**<sup>2</sup> These are the names of the 12 apostles: First, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.**

Verse 1 referred to the “12 disciples,” and verse 2 refers to the same group as ***the 12 apostles***. When termed disciples, the emphasis is on the Twelve being followers of Jesus and learners from Him. Now that they are being sent forth to minister, they are called *apostles*. The term *apostles* literally means “ones sent forth,” which is exactly what Jesus had in mind for them at this point. While we often use the terms interchangeably, sometimes referring to the Twelve as disciples and sometimes as apostles, the designations carry a subtle distinction. Those who were learners during the early period of being with Jesus reached a point at which they became extensions of Jesus’ ministry as those sent forth by Him.

In Luke we learn that Jesus spent a night in prayer before designating the Twelve from among a larger group of followers (Luke 6:12-13). That Jesus elected to limit the band of disciples to twelve is often seen in relation to the twelve tribes of Israel. The current leaders of the Jews had become ineffective as spiritual leaders of God’s covenant people. Jesus was forming a new covenant people and raising up new leadership equal in number to the original twelve tribes.



## VERSES 5-6

**<sup>5</sup> Jesus sent out these 12 after giving them instructions: “Don’t take the road leading to other nations, and don’t enter any Samaritan town. <sup>6</sup> Instead, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**

Before sending out the Twelve with His delegated authority, Jesus gave them specific instructions. His first instruction forbade them from ministering in any Samaritan town or taking roads leading to other nations. Specifically, Jesus assigned them a ministry to ***the lost sheep of the house of Israel***. Later, of course, the gospel was taken to other nations, as well as to Samaritans. It was a matter of timing. The Twelve had not yet reached the time in their own spiritual journey that would equip them to minister to non-Jews. In addition, this contributed to the emerging, controlling principle in gospel outreach: “first to the Jew, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).

***Is Jesus always specific when He gives one of His followers an assignment? How can His assignments be both specific and general?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use other Scripture passages to help understand a Bible passage.*

We should avoid reading Matthew 10:1-8 as a “once and for all time” instruction for how missionaries on the field should be supported. The instruction here must be interpreted in light of the later instruction in Luke 22:35-36 and other passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:1-14. We also must avoid reading Jesus’ instruction about going to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6) as evidence that Jesus had no concern for Gentiles. Read Matthew 8:5-13 and 28:19. How do those passages add to your understanding of Matthew 10:6?

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## VERSES 7-8

<sup>7</sup> **As you go, announce this: “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

<sup>8</sup> **Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, drive out demons. You have received free of charge; give free of charge.”**

Jesus instructed the apostles concerning the theme of their preaching, telling them to announce: **“The kingdom of heaven has come near.”** He then listed specific acts of ministry for which He was giving them authority. He identified four specific ministries: healing **the sick**, raising **the dead**, cleansing **skin diseases**, and driving out **demons**. The biblical record does not give us detailed information about how well they did in each of these areas, or even if they ever raised the dead during the assignment. In any case, these were specific for that occasion but not extended as instructions for missionaries in the future.

Jesus expressed the attitude the apostles were to take toward ministering to others: **You have received free of charge; give free of charge.** Two ideas emerge from this piece of instruction. One is that we minister best when we offer to others what we ourselves have experienced. Good teaching and preaching is that which contains the authenticity of one who speaks from having experienced what is being offered. More to the point is the other idea: the disciples were not to expect or receive payment for their ministry. This latter idea is not one that Jesus invoked for all future ministry but only for the mission among the lost sheep of Israel to which they were being sent at that time.

Later in the New Testament, multiple passages set forth the principle of a worker being worthy of his hire. Paul received financial support for his work. For example, the Philippian believers gave financial support to him on multiple occasions, but only when the ministry was being performed in other places. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul made it very clear that every minister has the right to expect that his congregation will adequately care for his needs so that he can devote himself to the needs of the people (1 Cor. 9:6-12). Today, local churches have the responsibility for adequately supporting their ministers and missionaries.



## IN MY CONTEXT

The needs of those who have not heard the gospel should move us to compassionate action. We should pray for God to continue to call men and women to serve Him both vocationally and as volunteers. We can trust God to provide for those He sends, realizing that all believers have a responsibility to go or to provide.

***When you hear or read about critical needs that people have, which types of needs tend to arouse your compassion? What can you do to enhance your compassion for others?***

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***Reflect on the many evidences of human needs, both physical and spiritual, at both the local and worldwide level. Devise a systematic plan that would enable your group to focus each week on a specific need during group prayer time. Be sure to include a focus on sending out missionaries.***

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***Examine your role in fulfilling Jesus' commission to make disciples. What need is God continuing to bring to your attention, and how are you responding? What obstacles need to be addressed for you to help meet that need? List actions you need to take.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest. —Matthew 9:38



# AN OPEN INVITATION

Jesus invites anyone willing to follow Him to join His kingdom.

## MATTHEW 11:20-30

<sup>20</sup> Then He proceeded to denounce the towns where most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent: <sup>21</sup> “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago! <sup>22</sup> But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. <sup>23</sup> And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today. <sup>24</sup> But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day



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of judgment than for you.”<sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to infants.

<sup>26</sup> Yes, Father, because this was Your good pleasure. <sup>27</sup> All things have been entrusted to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal Him. <sup>28</sup> Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> All of you, take up My yoke and learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for yourselves. <sup>30</sup> For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

*Record the stated reasons for Jesus' expectation that His hearers would accept His invitation, take His yoke, and learn from Him.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Many of us regularly receive invitations to weddings, birthday parties, baby showers, anniversaries, graduations, and other social gatherings. If connected to the internet, we may get invitations to buy products, subscribe to publications, contribute to charities, visit vacation sites, and join travel groups. We get informal invitations to join friends for lunch or to meet them for coffee and conversation. The sheer volume of invitations dictates that we must be discerning and disciplined in choosing those we accept. Many invitations come with a sense of obligation attached to them due to ties of friendship or family loyalty. Others are more elective, giving us greater latitude to refuse them.

*List the different kinds of invitations you have received in the past month. How do you determine which to accept and which to decline?*

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Jesus offered His hearers a special invitation: come to Him and find rest from their weariness. This invitation included the opportunity to learn from Him and serve alongside Him. The issue was whether the people would accept or decline Jesus' invitation.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 11:1-30**

Matthew's pattern of alternating narrative passages with teaching sections continues in chapter 11. Following the discourse in chapter 10, chapter 11 opens with a brief summary of Jesus' ongoing public ministry (11:1). The summary leads in to the next narrative passage. While moving among towns in Galilee, Jesus used the occasion of a question sent to Him by John the Baptist to praise John's ministry. Being imprisoned, John asked for verification that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah. Jesus pointed to miraculous deeds as His validating credentials (11:2-15).

In the course of preaching and teaching in various towns, Jesus denounced the lack of repentance by the majority of the people. By refusing to repent, the people put themselves in a more precarious position than would have been true of a place like Sodom, had its people been given the same opportunity afforded a place like Capernaum (11:16-24). During this period of His ministry, Jesus praised the Father for revealing truth to people of humble hearts, comparing such people to trusting infants as opposed to those who considered themselves to be wise and learned (11:25-27). At the end of the chapter Jesus invited weary and burdened people caught up in a religion of law-keeping to find rest in a personal relationship Him (11:28-30).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **PROMISED JUDGMENT** (MATT. 11:20-24)

#### **VERSE 20**

**<sup>20</sup> Then He proceeded to denounce the towns where most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent:**



Jesus had just characterized His generation as an unresponsive one. In general, people had not heeded the preaching of John the Baptist, choosing instead to criticize his unorthodox and austere lifestyle. In the same way, those same people kept their distance from Jesus, choosing to criticize His interaction with sinners whom He came to save (11:18-19). In the face of such unresponsiveness to those sent by God, Jesus **proceeded to denounce** the places where He performed miracles because the people **did not repent**.

#### VERSES 21-22

**<sup>21</sup> “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago! <sup>22</sup> But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.**

Jesus began the denunciation of His unrepentant audiences with the declaration, **“Woe to you.”** *Woe* is a term that mingles a declaration of doom with a feeling of pity to issue a solemn warning. Jesus addressed His warning to **•Chorazin** and **•Bethsaida** (see p. 6), Galilean cities that had witnessed many of His miracles. He pointed out the advantage those cities had over the ancient Phoenician cities of **•Tyre and •Sidon** (see p. 6). Prophets frequently denounced the Phoenicians for the worship of the pagan god Baal coupled with inhuman cruelty toward others (see Isa. 23). Being Gentiles, the Phoenicians lacked knowledge of the promises given to Israel.

The Jewish population of Chorazin and Bethsaida not only had knowledge of the promises of God and the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, they also had the witness of Jesus’ miracles and preaching. In the face of greater opportunity, their refusal to repent carried greater accountability. Jesus’ declaration points out that divine punishment takes into account people’s degree of opportunity.

#### VERSES 23-24

**<sup>23</sup> And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today. <sup>24</sup> But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”**

Continuing in the same vein, Jesus called **•Capernaum** (see p. 6) to task for its lack of responsiveness. Jesus made Capernaum the headquarters for a major portion of His public ministry, thus giving that city a greater exposure to His miracles and message. Jesus asserted that **the land of Sodom** would have responded differently if they had had the advantage the people of Capernaum had—the advantage of witnessing Jesus’ miracles and hearing His words. Once again, Jesus offered the principle that divine judgment takes into account people’s opportunity.

**List in order the five most grievous and destructive contemporary sins. Based on Jesus’ teaching here, where should rejection of Jesus rank on the list?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use multiple passages to understand a major doctrine.*

The most important theological question we should ask of any text is “What does this text teach about God, His character, and His ways?” Read Matthew 11:20-24. What does this text teach about God? Now read Matthew 11:28-30 and Jesus’ words of care and hope. What does this text teach about God? Allow both sections to inform your understanding of the nature of God. What is the determining factor in whether God brings retribution or rest? How might you respond the next time someone pits God’s love against His wrath?

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**PROMISED REVELATION** (MATT. 11:25-26)

**VERSE 25**

**25 At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to infants.**



Jesus' attention turned from the unrepentant majority in Galilee to the humble, believing minority. He drew a marked contrast between those who rejected Him and those who were open to receive divine revelation. He praised God for the latter group, whom He referred to as **infants**. Those with simple, uncomplicated faith receive far greater reward than the prideful and self-sufficient **wise and learned**.

Addressing His **Father** as **Lord of heaven and earth**, Jesus praised Him for His grace and wisdom in revealing truth to those disposed to receive it. Supposed self-sufficiency is always the enemy of a simple faith that looks to the Lord expecting to receive truths from Him that the wise and learned have not imagined.

God retains His prerogative as God to either conceal or reveal His truth. When He chooses to conceal truth, it serves as a rebuke to arrogance and unbelief. When He chooses to reveal truth, it comes as a gracious gift to people of faith.

#### VERSE 26

**26 Yes, Father, because this was Your good pleasure.**

Jesus emphasized the focus of His praise for people of sincere faith by restating the essence of His prayer: **Yes, Father, because this was Your good pleasure**. A heart open toward God and willing to take Him at His word brings Him pleasure. We can find no higher motive for our actions than that of seeking to bring God pleasure.

**Look up Matthew 7:6. How does Jesus' warning about casting pearls before pigs fit with Him thanking the Father for revealing the truth of the gospel to those who are willing to believe?**

#### KEY DOCTRINE: *God's Purpose of Grace*

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end.

## PROMISED RELATIONSHIP (MATT. 11:27)

### VERSE 27

**<sup>27</sup> All things have been entrusted to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal Him.**

The relationship between Christ and His Father has been uninterrupted from eternity past. That connection remained secure during Jesus' earthly sojourn. A key ingredient in the relationship was trust. Jesus declared, in fact, that ***all things*** had been ***entrusted*** to Him by His Father. Furthermore, the eternal relationship between Father and Son included full and intimate knowledge of one another. No one on earth has ever known the Father to the extent that the Son knew Him during the days of His flesh. Likewise, no one knows Christ with the fullness and intimacy that the Father knows Him.

Upon establishing the fact of their mutual knowledge, Jesus went further to declare that those who come to know Father do so because ***the Son desires to reveal*** the Father and is effective in doing so. We immediately hear in Jesus' claim the clear notes of divine sovereignty. The fact is that God is in charge and calls the plays, not us.

However, the Bible with equal clarity firmly establishes the fact of human free will and corresponding responsibility. In back-to-back sentences Jesus spoke with overtones of divine sovereignty and human free will. We hear sounds of sovereignty when He referred in this present verse to those *to whom the Son desires to reveal Him*. At the same time, we will see in the next verse that He invited all to come—an open invitation for everyone to respond (v. 28). Knowing God is both a choice we make and a choice He makes. Our logic is unable to match divine choosing and human freedom of choice, without exalting one over the other. So what logic cannot achieve, simple faith can accept while we await the day when the glass is no longer dark and we will know even as we are known. Our relationship with God through Christ is always based on faith and not on human reason.

The take-away truth in this verse is that Jesus' role in the Father's redemptive plan is the only way for humans to know the Father. No one knows the Father while bypassing personal faith in the Son.



***How do you respond when people label Christians as narrow and uncharitable for asserting that Jesus is the only way to the Father, with no other alternative?***

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## **PROMISED REST** (MATT. 11:28-30)

### **VERSE 28**

**<sup>28</sup> Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**

Jesus revealed His compassionate heart toward all who are ***weary and burdened***. He expressed His compassion through an open invitation: ***Come to Me, all of you***. The implication that lies under the surface of the invitation is that all who are invited possess the freedom to choose to come. In addressing those invited as *weary and burdened*, Jesus made reference to religious weariness rather than the physical weariness such as follows a day of hard labor. They were burdened by the stringent and burdensome requirements that their Jewish leaders placed on them.

One example among many of such burdensome requirements was that of the meticulous prohibitions attached to Sabbath observance. Counting steps, or marking distance people could travel on the Sabbath, was one such burden that religious leaders attached to Sabbath observance. Jesus established Himself as Lord of the Sabbath and insisted that the Sabbath was made for man, rather than man being made so that the Sabbath could have its observers (Mark 2:27).

Jesus invites people to live in God's grace, as opposed to a legalistic approach of following a list of what must be done or avoided in order to be approved and accepted. God's acceptance is by grace through faith. Once accepted, service to God is done as a delight more than a duty. In the spiritual life, legalistic duty leads to spiritual exhaustion but delight generates joyous energy. Jesus called this outcome ***rest***. He did not thereby refer to lounging around in inactivity. Christian service done in His name to His glory by the power of His Spirit has its own kind of rest. We might think of it as the exhilaration of having done God's work in God's way.



## VERSE 29

**29 All of you, take up My yoke and learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for yourselves.**

Jesus issued a second invitation to **all** people. This was an invitation to **take up** His **yoke**. In New Testament times everyone would have been familiar with seeing a yoke across the necks of a pair of oxen. The yoke connected them to one another. Taking up a yoke was a common image for choosing to be a disciple of another person. The basic idea is that of learning from a teacher. Thus, a summons to take up Jesus' yoke was an invitation to come to Him in order to, as He said, **learn from Me**.

One part of the motivation for accepting His invitation is the kind of person Jesus is. He is **gentle and humble in heart**. Unlike the religious leaders, Jesus was not harsh and legalistic. He possessed the capability of feeling what others felt. He related to common people with the common characteristic of genuine, inner humility. Jesus repeated His promise that His followers would find **rest**.

## VERSE 30

**30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”**

Another part of the motivation for accepting Jesus' invitation to come to Him is the nature of His **yoke**. His yoke is **easy** and His **burden is light**. Jesus' promise of rest resides in two assurances: first, that He Himself is gentle and humble; second, that His yoke is easy and His burden light.

Jesus' promise reminds us that to attempt serving Jesus in mere human energy is a burdensome path to tread. Such is a sure way to become weary in well-doing. Human qualities alone are not adequate to perform divine service. Such service requires divine power. Only divine service performed with divine power can be described as easy and light.

***Jesus promises that following Him is a life of rest, serving Him is an easy yoke, and bearing His burden is light. What factors make this true?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Every person will be held responsible if they choose to reject Christ. Jesus is the only way to the Father, with no other alternative. Jesus offers sure salvation to all who trust Him as Savior and Lord.

***Ponder the fact that every person is held responsible if they choose to reject Christ. What actions do you need to take in light of this reality?***

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***Review the content on the inside front cover about placing your faith in Christ. If you have made that decision, record how it has changed your life. If you have not made that decision, ask God to help you understand what you need to do.***

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***In light of the truth that Jesus offers salvation to all who trust Him as Savior and Lord, what might your Bible study group do that it is not now doing in efforts to bring others to a saving knowledge of Jesus?***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. —Matthew 11:28



# Session 12

## WHAT'S THE SIGN?

The proof of His rule is found in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

### MATTHEW 12:38-42

<sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” <sup>39</sup> But He answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at Jonah’s proclamation; and look—something greater than Jonah is here! <sup>42</sup> The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with this



generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and look—something greater than Solomon is here!”

*Note the different groups of people referenced and how each is described. Identify how each group responded when given an opportunity to express trust in God.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

We all from time to time look for a sign from heaven to direct our path. When a devoted church member was pondering changing jobs, he told his Bible study group that he was putting out a fleece in order to determine if he should accept the new job. A young couple was praying about taking a year off from their regular jobs prior to starting their family in order to accept a short-term mission opportunity overseas. They explained to their other family members that they would be awaiting their final decision to be confirmed in the mouth of two or three witnesses.

***What occurrences do people view as signs from God? Why do you think people seek some type of sign?***

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This week’s core passage tells of a time when some scribes and Pharisees approached Jesus to ask for a sign from Him. Their request had its origin in hearts of unbelief that were disposed to reject Jesus’ message and saving mission. By contrast, sincere Christians who put out fleeces or ask for confirming witnesses have their requests originating in hearts of faith that are disposed to do God’s will.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## **MATTHEW 12:1-50**

Matthew 12 opens with a controversy in a grainfield (vv. 1-8). The issue concerned actions of the disciples rather than Jesus himself. The controversy arose over the disciples picking and eating some heads of grain on a Sabbath Day. The take-away truth from this opening episode is that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.

The second episode was a confrontation in a synagogue (vv. 9-14). The issue again was Sabbath observance. Jesus healed a man with a paralyzed hand. His critics challenged Him with a question about whether healing on the Sabbath was a lawful activity. The take-away truth is that meeting human need trumps religious traditions.

The third episode encompasses a withdrawal and a warning (vv. 15-21). In the face of mounting criticism, Jesus sought to withdraw from the spotlight. His withdrawal was likely to allow time for opposition to cool. Jesus' warning to those who followed Him was about not making His whereabouts known, thus allowing time and distance to quiet the critics. A take-away truth from this is that Jesus was controlling His own destiny.

The next episode took the form of criticism that led to condemnation, all stemming from a notable healing (vv. 22-32). Jesus delivered a demon-possessed man who was both deaf and unable to speak. Pharisees accused Jesus of being in league with the prince of demons. With a logical response that pointed out that Satan would not lend power to cast out his own demons, Jesus accused His critics of blasphemy. A take-away truth is the seriousness of attributing a work of the Holy Spirit to an unholy spirit.

The episode just before our core passage was a teaching moment in which Jesus explained that outward acts stem from a person's heart (vv. 33-37). Drawing on a simple principle from nature, He reminded hearers that a tree's fruit matches the health of its root system—good roots equal good fruit, but bad roots result in bad fruit. Jesus declared that people are accountable for what they do and say. The take-away truth is that our deeds, whether good or bad, have their origin in our hearts.

Following the core passage (vv. 38-42), Matthew 12 records two more episodes. One was a teaching event in the form of a parable in



which Jesus warned against half-hearted repentance (vv. 43-45). A take-away truth is that attempts to rid one's heart of evil without allowing Jesus to enter and fill the heart can make the person an easy target of Satan.

The concluding episode occasioned Jesus' explanation about transcending relationships (vv. 46-50). His mother and brothers came to where Jesus was teaching. When Jesus was told they were outside and wanting to speak to Him, He declared that those who do His will enjoy the highest relationship with Him, even superseding that of His mother and brothers. The take-away truth is that real kinship with Jesus is based on a genuine spiritual relationship.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### SEEKING A SIGN (MATT. 12:38)

#### VERSE 38

**<sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."**

Often we tend to paint all *the scribes and Pharisees* with the same brush, profiling them all alike. When we stop and think, we realize some individuals were praiseworthy, such as Nicodemus and the scribe that Jesus described as not being far from God's kingdom (Mark 12:32-34). However, many scribes and Pharisees deserved Jesus' description of them as hypocrites (Matt. 23). Some from this latter group approached Jesus with the request for *a sign*.

The *scribes* were experts in the Mosaic law. As a group, they had their origin as copyists of the Old Testament Scriptures, something that had to be done by hand. This occupation resulted in their becoming very familiar with the books of the Old Testament. Over time that familiarity led to them becoming the experts in interpreting and teaching the sacred Scriptures. We might think of the scribes as the professional teachers in Jesus' day.

The *Pharisees* apparently had a noble beginning as laypersons who became deeply concerned over the neglect of the Mosaic law. Their concern fed the movement to become devoted practitioners of the law. Over time, this devotion caused them to become an extremely legalistic group that sought to set forth meticulously detailed lists



of actions that violated the law. As a movement, their mission was to impose detailed law-keeping on people. In pursuit of that goal, the Pharisees became exclusive. They tended to look down on their ordinary countrymen as ignorant sinners from whom they needed to separate themselves. Outward appearances took precedence over inward reality; therefore, Jesus often labeled the group as hypocrites.

The scribes and Pharisees introduced their demand for a sign with what sounded like a polite approach. Of course, we cannot tell if they were sincere or sarcastic in addressing Jesus as **“Teacher,”** a favorite title given to Jesus by the common people. Their term for a *sign* was one that meant a mighty work or a deed of unusual power.

Why would the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign? Jesus already had performed many miracles. Why wouldn't they have taken them as signs of His authenticity? Part of the answer might lie in the fact that the scribes and Pharisees were already accusing Jesus of being in league with the Devil, and thus they took His power to do wonders as coming from that unholy connection (Matt. 9:34; 12:24). Although they did not specify what kind of miracle would serve as the sign they desired, perhaps they wanted Jesus to perform on demand some deed of power that would occur instantaneously, such that they could verify did not involve invoking demonic powers or that could not be accounted for by some natural explanation.

***What are some conditions that people want to see or experience before believing God? Is waiting for a “certain feeling” comparable to waiting for a sign?***

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## **IDENTIFYING THE SIGN** (MATT. 12:39-40)

### **VERSE 39**

**<sup>39</sup> But He answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.**

Jesus' response to the request for a sign was to label His generation ***evil and adulterous***. By implication He included the scribes and Pharisees in that description, since they were members of that



generation. Old Testament prophets frequently used adultery to describe the people of their day. They used it as a metaphor or in a spiritual sense to describe people who were unfaithful to God. In particular, they applied the concept of adultery to those who forsook God to engage in the worship of idols. While idolatry had been effectively eliminated among the Jews of Jesus' time, He still used the term to describe a generation that largely failed to practice exclusive devotion to God and His commandments. Instead, they followed human traditions or devised ways to circumvent straightforward obedience to God's commandments. Such distortions amounted to wickedness in Jesus' eyes; hence, He described His generation as *evil*. Furthermore, unwillingness to receive God's word in simple faith, as evidenced in wanting to condition obedience on the performance of signs, was also deserving of the label *evil*. Unbelief is the soil out of which springs the need for signs. This unbelief and testing of God is different than a believer's seeking confirmation of God's direction.

***Describe the difference between honest inquiry and demanding confirmation. How are they similar? How are they different?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage includes an Old Testament reference.*

Typology is a method of interpretation that understands that people or events of the Old Testament point to a future event, most often to Jesus Christ. Jonah is presented as a type that pointed to Christ. Read the Book of Jonah. Consider the similarities between Jonah asleep in the boat during a storm and Jesus asleep in the boat during a storm (Matt. 8:23-27). In order to calm the storm, Jonah had to be thrown overboard. In Matthew 8, all Jesus had to do was rebuke the winds and sea. One greater than Jonah was there! What other aspects of Jonah and his story point forward to Christ?

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#### VERSE 40

**40 For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.**

Having responded to the scribes and Pharisees with the declaration that no sign would be forthcoming except that of the prophet Jonah, Jesus continued by elaborating on how Jonah constituted a sign. We recall that Jonah attempted to run from God's assignment to preach in Nineveh. He took passage on a ship heading in the opposite direction. While running away from God, Jonah ran into a fierce storm. But the storm was not the worst part of Jonah's experience. The worst part was a three-day exile inside a great fish God sent to rescue him from a watery death. Jonah came out of that ordeal with a changed mind. He was ready to hasten to Nineveh to do what God had called him to do.

Jesus compared Jonah's experience of spending three days in the fish to His own upcoming days in the tomb, which He described as being ***in the heart of the earth***. Two things stand out in the comparison. First is the observation that Jesus considered Jonah a historical person, not the main character in a work of fiction. Second was the fact that Jesus pointed to His resurrection from the dead as the only sign He was willing to offer in response to the request from the scribes and Pharisees.

Jonah experienced ***three days and three nights*** in the fish. As applied to the burial of Jesus, the phrase *three days and three nights* was a common idiom by which to refer to three days. In Jewish reckoning any part of a day would be counted as one day. Hence, Jesus was buried late on a Friday, remained in the tomb all of Saturday, and was raised early on Sunday—a sequence that would be described as being in the tomb three days.

So what was the sign of Jonah? It was the parallel experience of Jonah's deliverance from the belly of the huge fish after three days and Jesus' deliverance from the belly of the earth on the third day. Jonah and Jesus were each sent by God, and the ministry of each was certified as authentic by their deliverance from death. Jonah was the sign of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

While Jesus' many miracles should have been sufficient signs, the resurrection of Jesus is our ultimate sign that points us to the truth



that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah sent from the Father. God has no greater evidence to offer. The bodily resurrection of Jesus stands as the Father's supreme authentication of His Son.

***How does the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus serve as a sign for us today?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Son of God***

Jesus was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion.

### **A WARNING SIGN** (MATT. 12:41-42)

#### **VERSE 41**

**<sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at Jonah's proclamation; and look—something greater than Jonah is here!**

As a chastened prophet, Jonah took seriously God's assignment to preach in Nineveh. The result was widespread repentance at his preaching. Jesus drew a contrast between Nineveh's response to Jonah and the response of His generation to His ministry. Two points of contrast stand out. The first of these was the fact that pagan Gentiles, who did not have the advantage of the law of Moses and the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, had a better response to Jonah's proclamation than a generation of Israelites did to the preaching of Jesus. After all, Jesus was their promised Messiah. The Jews should have recognized Him as such and received Him gladly. The example of the repenting Ninevites stood in stark contrast to an unrepentant generation in general and the close-minded scribes and Pharisees in particular.

The second point of contrast was between the person of the human prophet and the Person of the incarnate Son of God. This difference included the ***greater*** witness given by the divine Son over

that given by a human prophet. To be sure, Jesus was a greater One than Jonah.

Jesus summed up the result of these contrasts with the declaration that the men of Nineveh would ***stand up at the judgment*** as condemnation of the unrepentant generation among whom Jesus preached. The underlying principle is that greater opportunity brings greater responsibility. When greater opportunity is not seized, greater judgment falls.

#### VERSE 42

**<sup>42</sup> The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and look—something greater than Solomon is here!”**

Jesus not only invoked the example of Jonah and the Ninevites but also that of ***the queen of the south***, identified in 1 Kings 10:1-13 as the Queen of Sheba. Like the Ninevites, *the queen of the south* was a Gentile. Nonetheless, her response to the wisdom of Solomon was remarkable. She traveled all the way from Arabia, described by Jesus as ***the ends of the earth***, to ***hear the wisdom of Solomon***. Jesus was greater than King Solomon. His point was that the Queen of Sheba would join with the Ninevites in leaving unbelieving Jews without excuse. Jesus’ intention was not to praise these Gentile examples but to shame His unbelieving generation.

Just as Jesus is greater than Jonah, so is He ***greater than Solomon***. Once again, the contrast in that greatness put those who heard the preaching of Jesus, the King of kings, in danger of greater condemnation than the Gentile queen who responded in a praiseworthy manner to Solomon, a human king.

***How would you compare your generation to the generation addressed by Jesus in this passage? What advantages do people today have that would make them face greater judgment for failure to believe in and live for Christ?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

While signs, which we would term rational evidence, do exist, Jesus calls us to trust Him in faith. Christian faith receives His death, burial, and resurrection as validating signs of the truth of His teaching, as well as His identity as the Son of God. Demanding that Jesus conform to our terms leads to judgment.

***Discuss as a group how you can approach Jesus with honest questions and needs of confirmation without demanding signs. How can you hold one another accountable for pursuing the truth and accepting what Jesus has revealed?***

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***Review how you share Jesus with others. Pay attention to the evidence you tend to use in your presentation. How do you point them to the evidence of the death, burial, and resurrection? Record the name of one person with whom you can share this truth.***

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***Reflect on your life, looking for ways you are attempting to obey God on your terms. Ask Him to reveal these areas to you and confess them to Him. Record insights you have gained about obeying God on His terms.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Here is My Servant whom I have chosen, My beloved in whom My soul delights; I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations. —Matthew 12:18





# Session 13

## ACCESS GRANTED

Jesus reveals the secrets of His kingdom to His followers.

### MATTHEW 13:1-13

<sup>1</sup> On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup> Then He told them many things in parables, saying: “Consider the sower who went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> As he was sowing, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup> Others fell on rocky ground, where there wasn’t much soil, and they sprang up quickly since the soil wasn’t deep. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered. <sup>7</sup> Others fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them.



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8 Still others fell on good ground and produced a crop: some 100, some 60, and some 30 times what was sown. 9 Anyone who has ears should listen!” 10 Then the disciples came up and asked Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” 11 He answered them, “Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them. 12 For whoever has, more will be given to him, and he will have more than enough. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. 13 For this reason I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand.”

*Note the distinctions in where the seed was sown and how that impacted the crop production.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Stories capture our imaginations, helping us remember and connect the dots. Having good information is important, but reading a story related to the information will help you to remember it better.

***Recall a story or book that helps you remember some timeless or important truth. What is the truth, and how does that story or book help you remember that truth?***

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Jesus was the premier storyteller. He made illustrations and stories a major feature of His preaching and teaching. We refer to these stories as parables. Jesus told parables partly due to the fact that they made truth understandable and memorable. His parables used things with which His hearers were familiar in order to convey to them spiritual truths that were not familiar. When people heard the words of a parable, they were able to envision the story or analogy. As has often been said, Jesus used parables to turn people’s

ears into eyes. What they heard formed mental pictures they could see. The first parable in a series of seven parables in Matthew 13 serves as an apt introduction to Jesus' teachings. This parable about a sower and the soil describes ways people responded to His teaching.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **MATTHEW 13:1-58**

Matthew 13 records the third major teaching section in the first Gospel. We already have covered two earlier teaching passages: the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7) and the instructions He gave for the ministry of His disciples, sometimes referred to as the Mission Message (chap. 10). Jesus delivered the third discourse beside the sea. It might be termed His Kingdom of Heaven discourse. The crowd that gathered became so numerous that Jesus pushed out from shore in a boat from which He spoke to the multitude.

This discourse is distinctive in that it is composed of seven parables: the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the priceless pearl, and the net, ending with a conclusion that uses the parable-like illustration about the master of a house. A further unique feature of the discourse is that it contains Jesus' own interpretation of two of the parables: the sower (vv. 18-23) and the wheat and the weeds (vv. 36-43).

Additional features of the discourse that are noteworthy are Jesus' explanation for His use of parables as a teaching technique (vv. 10-17) and the connection Jesus made between prophecy and His use of parables (vv. 34-35).

Jesus ended the discourse with what some count as an eighth parable (but which may be simply a concluding analogy) of a storehouse that contains things that are new and those that are old (vv. 51-53). His use of the analogy serves as a reminder that the parables are both a fresh way of presenting truths taught elsewhere in the Bible and a means of presenting new truth about God's kingdom.

At the conclusion of His discourse about the kingdom, Jesus departed for His hometown of Nazareth, where He met rejection in the very synagogue that likely had been a major scene in His formative years in Nazareth (vv. 54-58).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## A CROWD (MATT. 13:1-3a)

### VERSES 1-2

**<sup>1</sup> On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore.**

Jesus left a *house* to go to a place *by the sea*. Presumably, the house was the one to which His mother and brothers had come seeking to speak to Him (see 12:46-50). While He was sitting beside the sea, a crowd gathered in such number that Jesus found it necessary to enter a boat, push out from the seaside, and address the crowd that ***stood on the shore***.

In that day, teachers usually sat while speaking and their audience stood while hearing, so Jesus ***sat*** in the boat to speak to the standing crowd. Even if we were to assume that Jesus left the crowded house in order to find solitude at the seashore, we should take note that whenever a crowd assembled Jesus was willing to share His message with them. That being the case, He set a worthy example of putting His personal desires aside to minister to the spiritual needs of others.

### VERSE 3a

**<sup>3a</sup> Then He told them many things in parables, saying:**

Jesus spoke ***many things*** to the crowd by means of ***parables***. What is a parable? Some parables are stories, complete with characters and a storyline, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). However, not all parables are stories. Some parables are very brief, consisting of a simple analogy, such as the parable about the blind leading the blind in Luke 6:39, which reads more like a proverbial saying than a story parable.

Whatever their length or type, parables usually involve some kind of analogy in which something very familiar or common is made the vehicle by which to express spiritual truths. Jesus was a master at taking something common to His hearers' experience and showing how it could illuminate spiritual matters. This is what He did with His parable about a sower and the soils upon which he cast seed.

## A PARABLE (MATT. 13:3b-9)

### VERSE 3b

**3b “Consider the sower who went out to sow.**

Jesus invoked the image of a typical first-century farmer sowing seed in a field. The image that would have formed in the hearers’ minds was not that of neatly plowed rows across the field. Rather, they would have envisioned a sower with a bag of seeds walking across the field while scattering or broadcasting the seeds. Having covered the field with seeds, the farmer would then likely go back over the field scratching or plowing the seeds into the soil. Jesus proceeded to turn attention not to the sower or his seeds but to the different types of soil found in the field. This focal point has led some to refer to this as the parable of the soils.

### VERSE 4

**4 As he was sowing, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate them up.**

People often took shortcuts by walking across fields, thereby creating paths where the soil became pressed down and hardened by the sowing time of the next growing season. The technique of scattering seed did not lend itself to carefully avoiding the compacted pathways. The sower simply covered the whole area with seeds. Seeds lying exposed on the hardened surface of *the path* drew the attention of *birds* who found delight in devouring them.

Jesus explained this parable in verses 18-23. He interpreted this type of soil as the person who “hears the word about the kingdom and doesn’t understand it” (v. 19). Like the birds in the field, “the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart” (v. 19). The soil that is packed down and hard produces no fruit.

### VERSES 5-6

**5 Others fell on rocky ground, where there wasn’t much soil, and they sprang up quickly since the soil wasn’t deep. 6 But when the sun came up they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered.**

Some of the seeds landed on shallow soil that had a rock shelf just below it. In the shallow topping of soil the seed would sprout but



would be unable to sink roots into the ground. The result would be the withering of the young sprouts under the scorching sun. Again, no harvest would result from those seeds. In His later explanation, Jesus compared the rocky soil to hearers who made a hasty but shallow response. Without deep heart commitment, those hearers would stumble in the face of pressure or persecution (vv. 20-21). Such shallow hearers would not become fruitful.

#### VERSE 7

**<sup>7</sup> Others fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them.**

Whatever clearing of the field might have been done, roots of thorn bushes remained in the soil awaiting their time to sprout and grow. Sprouts of grain from the good seed would be no match for the thorn bushes. The **thorns** would simply choke out the grain. No harvest would be gathered from such areas in the field.

Jesus explained the thorns as representative of “the worries of this age and the seduction of wealth” (v. 22) that choke out and make unfruitful the truths of the kingdom.

#### VERSE 8

**<sup>8</sup> Still others fell on good ground and produced a crop: some 100, some 60, and some 30 times what was sown.**

Without distinguishing the proportion of seed that fell on the unfruitful places in the field from that which fell on good ground, Jesus emphasized the productivity of good seed planted on **good ground**. Presumably, the majority of seeds sown in a field would be aimed at good soil. To make His point, Jesus’ parable assigned varying percentages to the potential harvest, some seeds yielding a crop **100** times more than the volume of seeds sown, others **60** times more, and yet some **30 times** more. By means of the varying percentages, Jesus’ message conveyed the reality that positive responses to the truths of the kingdom might vary from person to person.

Jesus’ explanation of the parable included a significant difference between the fruitful hearers and the unfruitful ones. Everyone in the crowds that gathered heard His words. Those who identified with the impacted paths, the shallow soil places, and the thorn-infested parts



all heard His words. Of the fruitful hearers, however, He said they both heard and understood the message (v. 23).

#### VERSE 9

**<sup>9</sup> Anyone who has ears should listen!**

Jesus ended the parable with an admonition that those with **ears** should **listen**, not to catch the mere sound of His words but to understand their meaning. Jesus frequently attached this same appeal to His words (Matt. 11:15; 13:43; Luke 8:8; 14:35). By phrasing the admonition to **anyone who has ears**, His warning was for all who were in the crowd. They all possessed ears. The problem with some in the crowd was that they were not open to receive and act on His message.

***What principles for sharing spiritual truth can be found in this parable?  
How can believers follow these principles in today's world?***

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#### KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom*

The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King.

**A REASON** (MATT. 13:10-13)

#### VERSES 10-11

**<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came up and asked Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” <sup>11</sup> He answered them, “Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them.**

Apparently, after Jesus had finished a day of speaking to great crowds beside the sea, He was alone with the disciples. They had a question: **“Why do You speak to them in parables?”** In responding, Jesus referred to the **secrets of the kingdom of heaven**. We think of secrets



as information kept private from others. In the New Testament the idea is rather different. Sometimes referred to as mysteries, secrets are truths that can only be known as God reveals them. Humans cannot attain God's truths by philosophical reasoning or other mental activity. Truths about God's kingdom come only as God makes them known, as He did through Jesus' ministry of teaching and through inspired prophets and disciples writing other books of the Bible.

The disciples had committed themselves to Jesus and His message. That prior commitment became for them the open window through which they could begin to see and understand God's revealed truths about His kingdom. That being true, Jesus declared that it was **given** to them **to know** the secrets of the Kingdom. Many others, as demonstrated throughout the previous chapter, lacked such a commitment. Hence, it had **not been given to them** to understand the same revealed truth that committed hearers understood. The lack of faith and commitment closed the window to their understanding. That closed window was but the beginning of divine judgment on unbelief; hence, parables were serving to conceal truth from them, while at the same time serving to clarify truth to committed followers like the disciples.

Strange as it may seem, Jesus chose to teach in parables because parables could simultaneously reveal truth and conceal it. People of faith could perceive spiritual truth embedded in the everyday analogies that Jesus employed. Those without faith heard interesting stories and analogies but missed the embedded truth. Thus, Jesus' method of teaching truth through parables was used to give little or no insight to hearers who persisted in unbelief and resistance.

#### VERSE 12

**<sup>12</sup> For whoever has, more will be given to him, and he will have more than enough. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.**

The principle behind using parables to reveal truth to committed followers was simply that **whoever has, more will be given**. Those who brought hearts of faith to the hearing of parables would have more truth added to their lives. The reverse of the principle is that one who lacks genuine commitment finds that whatever inkling he or she

might have into God's revealed truth will soon find even that bit of insight fading away. A bit of truth not fully received and acted on is ultimately lost and forgotten.

**VERSE 13**

**<sup>13</sup> For this reason I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand.”**

By restating the concealing purpose of His parables, Jesus underscored the sad plight of His critics. He used the paradox of people seeing, but not really seeing, and hearing, but not really hearing. He indicted such members of his audience over their unwillingness to see, hear, and understand the revealed truth of God He had come to deliver. The issue was their hard-hearted unwillingness to receive God's truth embodied in Jesus and taught by Him.

***What explanations might be given for why some hearers of the Word of God do not give evidence of understanding it and letting it make a difference in their lives?***

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**BIBLE SKILL: *Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words or phrases.***

Look up the word *parable* in a Bible dictionary (either print or online). How is *parable* defined? Can you find any examples of parables in the Bible other than those taught by Jesus? What are the common themes of Jesus' parables? Identify any significant principles that should be followed in interpreting parables.

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Jesus shared God's truth whenever a willing group gathered to listen. Then, as now, when the gospel is shared, the responses will vary. Nonetheless, by the grace of God, everyone should be given the opportunity to consider Jesus' teachings, even those who reject Him.

***Describe how you typically present the gospel message to others. What role do stories have in what you share? What stories do you use to more clearly communicate the truth of the gospel?***

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***Determine how your Bible study group could serve as an encouragement for sharing the gospel. How can the group hold each other accountable for sharing spiritual truth with others?***

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***List the names of people you know who need to know about Jesus. Record the steps you need to take to make it possible for them to hear the gospel.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Anyone who has ears should listen! —Matthew 13:9



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# LECRAE'S CONFESSION

By Tony Reinke, *desiringGod.org*

Lecrae, a 36-year-old, Grammy Award-winning hip-hop artist, has a love and a passion for Jesus Christ. He knows firsthand the guilt of abortion, but he also knows such deep guilt can only be relieved by the open confession of sin. It was honesty that opened the door of healing for Lecrae, who has come forward to admit he advocated for the destruction of his own child in 2002.

Lecrae put his story in the public spotlight voluntarily, and in a big way, in the track “Good, Bad, Ugly” from *Anomaly* (2014), an album which debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 chart.

In an interview, Lecrae said, “I was a young man trying to figure out what I was going to do with life. I hadn’t finished school. I had met the Lord, but I was still trying to get my footing in terms of walking with Jesus. There was so much that happened. Literally, in the middle of that relationship, I was feeling the conviction. I felt like God was giving me opportunities to escape. We were doing drugs and engaged in sexual activity consistently.

“At the time, I believed an urban myth that if you consume enough drugs you would become sterile. I thought we would never get pregnant. I remember we were both working at a call center, and we went out for our smoke break one day, and she hesitated to smoke the cigarette. And that is when she informed me that she was pregnant.”

Lecrae sensed abortion was the wrong decision, but he also saw abortion as an easy escape from the responsibilities of fatherhood. He said, “Had it not been for the conviction of the Spirit, who I was suppressing with drugs and alcohol, I don’t know if I would have felt anything. But I was so callous and so hard-hearted that it was almost second nature to say: ‘Oh, well, you ought to get an abortion.’ I was so self-centered at this point in time, and not God-centered at all, that it wasn’t even a question; it was just me convincing her that this was the right thing to do.

“After the abortion, I really pretty much shut it out of my mind, literally to the point—it is



shameful—I ignored all her calls. I quit dealing with her altogether. The last time I saw her I remember she was curled up on a bed crying, and I pushed all of it out of my mind. And what I kept were pictures of her, as a memorial in some senses.”

The memory could not be shut out of his mind forever. He knew the abortion he persuaded, like most abortions, was not explained away by compelling medical reasons. In this overriding choice of self-preference over the life of a child comes the guilt that lingers. He kept a picture of the ex-girlfriend as a secret memorial to their unborn child. It would become a reminder that would later force open an old wound as he prepared to marry his fiancée.

Lecrae said, “Years down the line I was going through premarital, getting rid of pictures of my ex-girlfriends, to say my mind and my heart are focused on this woman here, and I don’t need any reminders of anything. And I came across her picture and I couldn’t throw it away. And my wife said, ‘Just throw it in the trash.’ I literally broke down over the guilt and the remorse and the shame of it all. That was the beginning of the healing process for me.”

It was a healing process he wanted to share. When he wrote and recorded the story into the *Anomaly* album, he first prepared his mother with a phone call for the story she didn’t know.

Lecrae’s confession of sin, first to his future wife, and then to others in his life, and then to the public, is an invitation for many who find the guilt of abortion impossible to shake.

Millions of adults now have the same opportunity to find healing. Every year around the world, nearly 45 million abortions leave 45 million children dead and 90 million others, both women and men, with permanent scars to carry. John Ensor, president of PassionLife has said, “For over 20 years now, the guilt and regret of abortion is the most common human experience of our generation.”

And yet there remains a default response, to cover over the sin in isolation and shame. From that experience Lecrae is pleading for others to consider an honest confession of their sin to God, which is the first and necessary step to finding true healing (Ps. 32:3-5).

Personal restoration is possible, and Lecrae is a living testimony. By God’s grace, he was willing to face his sin honestly and openly, to weep and confess, and to draw near the blood of Christ. He’s now married to his wife Darragh, and they have three children. Lecrae is, in the words of Ensor, “standing tall as a godly man.”

Read more from Lecrae in his first book, *Unashamed*, available for pre-order now. [www.UnashamedBook.com](http://www.UnashamedBook.com)

This article was adapted from [www.desiringgod.org/articles/lecræ-confesses-abortion-invites-others-into-the-light](http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lecræ-confesses-abortion-invites-others-into-the-light). Used by permission.



# COMING NEXT QUARTER

## ACTS (PART 1)

- Session 1 **Entrusted** > *Acts 1:1-11*
- Session 2 **Empowered** > *Acts 2:1-15*
- Session 3 **Unified** > *Acts 2:41-47*
- Session 4 **Resurrected!** > *Luke 24:1-12\**
- Session 5 **Courageous** > *Acts 4:1-13*
- Session 6 **Integrity** > *Acts 4:36-37; 5:1-11*
- Session 7 **Faithful** > *Acts 5:25-35,38-42*
- Session 8 **Selfless** > *Acts 6:1-10*
- Session 9 **Obedient** > *Acts 8:26-31,35,38-39*
- Session 10 **Converted** > *Acts 9:3-9,15-20*
- Session 11 **Bold** > *Acts 9:36-43*
- Session 12 **Accepting** > *Acts 10:9-15,43-48*
- Session 13 **Extraordinary** > *Acts 12:7-12,16-19*

\*Easter Evangelistic Emphasis

# MEMORY VERSES

1

»» For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight! —*Matthew 3:3*

2

»» She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. —*Matthew 1:21*

3

»» Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. —*Matthew 2:11*

4

»» Then Jesus told him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him." —*Matthew 4:10*

5

»» You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. —*Matthew 5:14*

6

»» But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. —*Matthew 6:33*

7

»» But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. —*Matthew 5:44*

# MEMORY VERSES

8

» Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." —*John 14:6*

9

» Then Jesus told the centurion, "Go. As you have believed, let it be done for you." And his servant was cured that very moment. —*Matthew 8:13*

10

» Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest. —*Matthew 9:38*

11

» Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. —*Matthew 11:28*

12

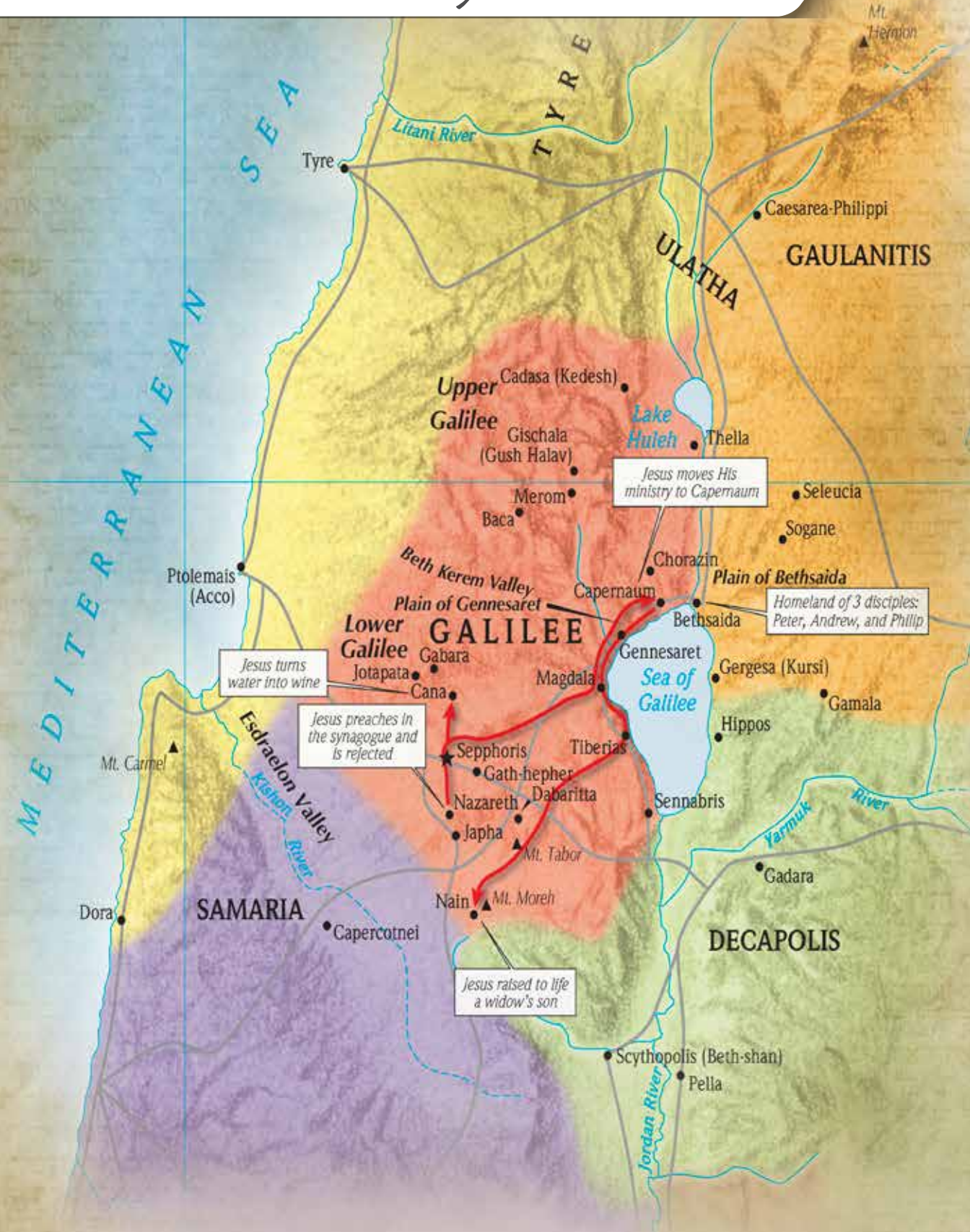
» Here is My Servant whom I have chosen, My beloved in whom My soul delights; I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations. —*Matthew 12:18*

13

» Anyone who has ears should listen! —*Matthew 13:9*



# Jesus' Ministry in Galilee



# Matthew 1–13

Who would you want to write your life story? Would you put the task in the hands of your tax accountant? God used four different men to record the gospel story of Jesus in Scripture. One of these men, Matthew (also known as Levi), worked as a tax collector until Jesus called him to be a disciple and apostle. As a tax man, Matthew bowed to an earthly ruler. When he became a follower of Christ, he began to serve the eternal King of kings.

Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the One who was born King of the Jews. After His baptism, Jesus preached the good news of God's kingdom. He told parables so that His followers might understand the kingdom of heaven. He fulfilled the prophecy of Zion's coming King. A sign on His cross proclaimed Him a King, and His resurrection confirmed His regal authority.



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