



## **A Bible Reading Plan for the Gospel of Matthew**

October 16-December 3

Mountain Brook Baptist Church  
[www.mbbc.org](http://www.mbbc.org)



# Matthew

## ABOUT PROJECT 119

Project 119 is a Bible reading initiative of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Our hope is that every member of our church family would be encouraged in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ through the regular reading of God's Word.

This reading plan will guide you through the gospel of Matthew. The plan provides you a devotional thought and suggested Scripture reading for each day of the week. On the weekends, we suggest that you re-read the Scripture passages that you have been working through during the past week.

To receive email updates when devotionals are added to the blog, go to [www.mbbc.org/blog](http://www.mbbc.org/blog), click on "Subscribe to Mountain Brook Blog by Email" and follow the instructions. To learn more about Project 119 and to access previous plans, visit [www.mbbc.org/project119](http://www.mbbc.org/project119).

## INTRODUCTION

The gospel of Matthew is attributed to a tax collector named Matthew; in fact, he's the same tax collector who Jesus calls to follow Him in Matthew 9:9. Matthew was a Jew from Galilee whose life was forever changed on the fateful day when he met Christ. Because he was a tax collector, he would have been trained to write and had the abilities to record this firsthand account of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Matthew's focus in his gospel shows us Jesus as the true King of the Jews, the One who came to fulfill the messianic prophecies of old. Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy tracking Jesus' lineage back to both David and Abraham, reminding us of Christ's Jewish roots. But even as he traces back, he also points forward to the story of a new King, Jesus, who has come to save His people from their sin. As we continue to read in Matthew, we will begin to understand that "His people" doesn't just refer to the lost sheep of Israel, the Jews, but will expand to include the Gentiles, the nations. Thus, Matthew's gospel speaks to the Jew, beseeching him to trust in Christ as the true Messiah, while also speaking to the Gentiles proclaiming the good news of the gospel, that salvation is offered to all who believe, regardless of ethnicity.



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## WEEK ONE: MATTHEW 1-4 DOUG DORTCH

**Monday, October 16 | Matthew 1 | Doug Dortch**

“What’s In a Name?”

Names are important today, primarily because they give us ways to identify one another. Watch new parents and see how much they agonize over getting the “right” name. Much is at stake when it comes to naming a newborn.

In the Bible days, names were even more important because of how they also served as a way for the parents to convey their hopes for the newborn child. Parents didn’t name their children based on how the name sounded; parents named their children based on what the name meant. Names conveyed promise and hope.

We see that factor in play in the birth of Jesus. Because Matthew was writing predominantly for an audience that was Jewish in makeup, he begins his account of the Jesus story with a lengthy genealogy that traces Jesus’ family ties to Abraham, the original father of God’s covenant people, and through David, father of the Messianic promise. As you will see in your reading of this gospel, Matthew’s primary aim is to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s messianic hopes and the one in whom God’s covenant promises find completion.

What’s unusual about Jesus’ birth narratives in Matthew is that they tell us how Joseph, the husband of Mary, fits in the picture. When Joseph discovers that Mary, his betrothed, is great with child, he plans on divorcing her, because he is a righteous man and he has the Law of Moses on his side. But when the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and assures him that this pregnancy is God’s doing, he also gives Joseph specific instructions on what the child is to be named. “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus (which means ‘God is our salvation’), because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Joseph then awakens from his dream and does precisely what he has been told. Clearly, God chose a righteous man in Joseph to participate in His act of redemption. While Mary “gave” birth to the Christ child, Joseph “gave” him a name, and a name that is above all other names (Acts 4:12).

As you begin your reading of the gospel, don’t miss the manner in which no part of God’s redemptive plan is left to chance. Marvel at the details of the Jesus story, beginning with His covenant lineage and extending on to His obedient earthly father, one who could bring Jesus up to appreciate the necessity of doing what God gives one to do. Most of all, find comfort in your confession that Jesus is the promised Messiah, whom God indeed sent to be the means to our salvation, and be certain that, as the old hymn puts it, there is indeed something about that name.



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**Tuesday, October 17 | Matthew 2 | Doug Dortch**

“Evil Is Not King, Jesus Is”

The birth of Jesus did not happen in a vacuum. There were already powers in place that were not open to sharing their authority. In Rome was Caesar and in Judea was his puppet king Herod.

From all accounts Herod was a basket case. His paranoia was legendary, especially given the fact that he had several of his sons murdered to head off any power grab by a potential heir. As many Jews would say, “It would be better to be Herod’s pig (an unclean animal for the Jews) than it would to be his son.”

It’s understandable then that when word reached Herod from the magi from the east about a “newborn king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2), he “was disturbed.” That’s putting it mildly. Herod was most likely beside himself at their inquiry about the new king’s location.

A quick search of the Scriptures by the chief priests and teachers of the law (soon to be antagonists of Jesus themselves!) revealed that Bethlehem was the promised birthplace. Herod then dispatched the magi to check out the possibilities and report back to him so that he too might go and worship the newborn king (Matthew 2:8). But after locating the Christ child and acknowledging Him with gifts fit for royalty, they returned to their country by another way and did not follow up with Herod.

When Herod learned that the magi had deceived him, he took matters into his own hands, issuing an edict that would result in the killing of all boys in Bethlehem two years of age and under. Granted, Bethlehem was not a large place at the time and the number of such boys would have been small, but regardless of the number, the rage of Herod shows the inexcusable brutality of the times.

Fortunately, Joseph had been warned in a second dream to take Mary and Jesus and escape into Egypt until Herod no longer ruled the land. This departure sets the stage for an important theme in Matthew’s gospel: Jesus is a “new Moses,” and as Moses emerged from Egypt to deliver God’s people from a brutal Pharaoh, so Jesus would come from the same country to redeem his people in similar fashion.

When Herod died, Joseph and Mary returned to Israel, only not back to Bethlehem because of angelic counsel in yet another dream, but this time to Nazareth, which would become the hometown of Jesus. Joseph’s obedience to God’s direction plays no small part in Jesus being able to escape despotic clutches until He grows up and is physically and spiritually prepared to take them on as God will empower Him to do.

What may seem to be evil’s intent to frustrate God’s redemptive purposes utterly fails. Joseph’s obedience makes it possible for good to prevail. As we consider God’s direction in our own lives, may we see how our obedience might also stymie evil’s aims in our day and extend God’s redemptive purposes in the same way.



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**Wednesday, October 18 | Matthew 3 | Doug Dortch**

“Preparing the Way”

John the Baptist plays a significant role in each of the four gospels as a forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. A prophet in the order of Elijah, John moves out into the wilderness south of Jerusalem where the multitudes come to show their readiness for God’s redemption through repentance, confession, and baptism.

When the religious leaders go out to check out John’s ministry, he does not greet them with warm expressions. Ever the prophet, John denounces their hypocrisy and disputes their claim of being connected to Abraham (a connection we saw Jesus enjoying in the lengthy genealogy of the first chapter). John’s message was that God was raising up His Messiah who would baptize with “the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11), symbols of holy judgment against those who felt themselves religiously entitled. Little did John know that the one about whom he had been speaking would approach him for baptism, but not for repentance; Jesus came “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), a public testimony to His desire to do God’s bidding regardless of the costs. As Joseph had shown obedience, now Jesus was doing the same; and in response, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice from heaven announced God’s pleasure with what Jesus had vowed to do (Matthew 3:17).

Jesus’ baptism models our own act of confession and our first step of obedience. It enables us to know God’s pleasure with our willingness to do His bidding and prepares us to join the chorus of other faithful people to prepare the way for Jesus to establish God’s reign upon earth.

**Thursday, October 19 | Matthew 4:1-11 | Doug Dortch**

“Temptations Come to All, Even Jesus”

As Herod’s story showed us, evil never gives up without a fight. Even Jesus, as He prepared for His public ministry, faced times of testing, which challenged His spirit and at the same time prepared Him for the ministry to which God had called Him.

The temptations Jesus faced were all designed to have Him question God’s calling. Each was prefaced with the phrase, “If you are God’s Son.” Satan no doubt wanted to sow seeds of mistrust in Jesus’ heart, but Jesus was able to reject them by appealing to Scripture and the promise that God would return Jesus’ faithfulness with His own.

We may think that life would be easier if we didn’t have to encounter temptation, and perhaps it would. But Jesus’ temptations formed Him for the work God had called Him to do and His obedience to each of them made Him spiritually stronger. The same could happen for us if we too would cling to the promises of God’s Word. Then instead of being seasons of distress that weaken our spirits, they could become opportunities



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for us to join Jesus in growing our faith so that we too might be more ready for the work God has for us to do.

**Friday, October 20 | Matthew 4:12-25 | Doug Dortch**

“The Ministry Begins”

Most of Jesus’ early ministry took place in Galilee, a backwoods part of the Holy Land, but one that the prophet Isaiah had prophesied would be the locus of God’s activity in fulfilling His redemptive promises. (By the way, Isaiah is the prophet quoted more times in the New Testament than any other.)

But not only does Jesus follow God’s calling in His preaching and teaching ministry by Himself, He calls disciples, whom He will train to carry on His mission at the appropriate time. Notice the composition of the group. They are ordinary fishermen, not religious types. It is an indication of how Jesus will lean on regular people to live into a holy calling and do things they never dreamed they would be able to do.

Jesus’ ministry focused on the “kingdom of heaven,” a means by which God’s rule might become more apparent on earth, regardless of the Herods and the Caesars who always assume they are in control. Only Jesus is able to give people what they really need – healing and wholeness.

It’s that sort of work to which we are called today. We are not called to any new ministry; our calling is to carry on what God began in Jesus. When we do, God’s kingdom comes and His will continues to be done, on earth as it always is in heaven.

You don’t have to be special to participate in that work. You just have to be obedient. From Joseph to John the Baptist, to the first disciples, and to me and you, that’s all God requires. He will do the rest.

**Saturday, October 21-Sunday, October 22 | Matthew 1-4**

Reread Matthew 1-4 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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## WEEK TWO: MATTHEW 5-8 MARY SPLAWN

### Monday, October 23 | Matthew 5:1-12 | Mary Splawn

In chapter five we read what is called The Beatitudes, where Jesus speaks blessings over the crowds. In my red letter version of the Bible, it is easy for me to skim over verses one and two because I see lots of red coming in verse three (meaning Jesus is directly speaking). But the first phrase of verse one is worth contemplating. It says, "Now when Jesus saw the crowds..."

As Jesus looks at the people who gathered, I don't believe He sees them as a big crowd who needed to be corralled but as individuals with stories and struggles and past disappointments and hearts that needed the leading of a gentle shepherd.

And so He begins to speak blessings over them. His words are filled with comfort for those who know they are spiritually bankrupt or are experiencing persecution (Matthew 5:3,10), words of encouragement for those who turn over the reigns of life to God (Matthew 5:5), words of hope for those who seek to do what is right (Matthew 5:6, 11-12), and words that reveal great expectations for those who desire to take every thought captive and make it obedient to the Lord (Matthew 5:6-9).

They are words spoken to real live people to bring hope. Jesus saw the crowds, and we have the opportunity to see them too. We see them next door, a neighbor in need of a kind word or a helping hand. We see them at the grocery store or restaurant or gas station: a bag boy we can invite to church, a waiter we can encourage with a kind tip and a sincere prayer, and an attendant whom we can look in the eyes and ask for God's compassion and understanding about their circumstances. We see them at work, yes...even those with whom we have difficulty, we have an opportunity to bless through peaceful speech and by avoiding the judgment of their thoughts! We see them at the sports field, where we can be strategically praying and engaging with those whom God is placing in our path. We see them everywhere if we ... just ... will.

Ours can be a life filled with blessing others. We must see that as our mission and follow the example of our Savior.

*As we seek to bless others, Lord, we pray that the most needed blessing of all - saving knowledge of You - will be realized in the lives of those we encounter and encourage today.*

### Tuesday, October 24 | Matthew 5:13-48 | Mary Splawn

In this section of Scripture, Jesus calls His listeners to be salt and light; a welcomed change in a world that is tasteless and dark (Matthew 5:13-16). Then He clarifies why He has come to the world, not to get rid of the law of God but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17-20). Next, Jesus goes through a series of statements where He



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takes what is a common thought about appropriate practice and He elevates the call to faithful living (Matthew 5:21-48).

As you read the sections that are formulated, "You have heard it said ... but I say", keep in mind the context. Jesus is preaching to the crowd, encouraging them to be people who live differently in the world so that they might bring glory to God.

In these verses, Jesus calls His audience to pursue reconciliation, avoid adulterous thoughts at all costs, honor faithful marriage, be people of their word, seek to bless when others curse and abuse, and finally, to love their enemies by praying for them.

These are some of the most difficult and challenging words of Christ. While Jesus is not giving hard and fast rules for every scenario (for example, He's not calling us to give money to an addict who begs for money), He is asking us to seek a heart whose default is love and grace. Jesus displayed this heart when He willingly gave Himself up for us as Romans 5:10 says, "While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son."

Jesus challenges His listeners to behave in a way that shows godliness. As we seek to live to this high level of expectation, we are saying to a "me-focused" world around us that there is someone else to whom all attention and praise is due - the Lord Christ.

## **Wednesday, October 25 | Matthew 6 | Mary Splawn**

In the first part of Matthew 6, Jesus teaches about several spiritual disciplines (giving, praying, fasting) and how each should be done. Jesus reminds us of the danger of flashy religious practice. He says our giving should be done in a humble manner. And our prayers should be sincere and should avoid showy language! After teaching about prayer, Jesus moves to the topic of fasting (abstaining from food).

Like other spiritual disciplines such as prayer and giving, fasting can be manipulated for personal gain. Yet, when fasting is oriented around the goals of worshipping God, repenting of our sin, and renewing our devotion to God, it is a meaningful practice that should be part of our spiritual development.

Jesus says "when you fast ..." and not "if."

Fasting helps us shift our focus from food to faith. It gives us an opportunity to say to God, "I depend on you to meet my needs." In addition, fasting is associated with repentance and spiritual cleansing.

Interestingly, fasting often reveals the things that control us. When we give something up, we recognize how much we depend on that item for our comfort. Yet, the awareness of our weakness helps to remind us of our deep need for God's help and grace.



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One difficult aspect of fasting is that we feel that it should be pretty private. This is a good inclination since Jesus mentions the importance of not fasting so others will see. Admittedly, we have to be around people throughout the day who may notice we are not eating. But, this risk doesn't outweigh the benefits of fasting.

Pray asking God to help you be humble in the process and then tell people who must know about the fast. Perhaps, pick one day or several meals to give up food (while continuing to drink lots of water) and focus the time you would eat on learning about God and communing with God. If you can't give up food totally because of a medical condition, consider abstaining from something else that has a controlling presence in your life (i.e. television, social media, coffee and other caffeinated drinks) or consider a partial fast.

During the fast, journal your thoughts and feelings and reflect on how your fast is affecting your mood and actions. Use the time you would eat to pray about whatever worries you and as a time to read Scripture. Ask the Lord to strengthen your faith and to help you understand more clearly His statement "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

## **Thursday, October 26 | Matthew 7 | Mary Splawn**

Often, we judge what we can physically see, but sometimes we judge what we can't even see ... the thoughts of others.

Have you ever judged someone for what you knew they thought about you, although they had never said it? Or, have you judged an acquaintance because you assumed he or she didn't like you, even when the evidence is minimal? Or, have you ever assumed you knew someone's personality and character flaws just by looking at them?

When we judge others' thoughts, we are sinning. By assuming the worst, we are condemning the heart of another. If the other person is a follower of Christ, we are making the assumption that they are ignoring the work of God in their life, who teaches us to be kind and peaceful, humbly seeking to see the best in others. Ultimately, when we judge what someone else is thinking, we often believe the worst. We all want others to give us the benefit of the doubt, and yet it is so hard for us to do the same for others. But Jesus warns, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

He goes on to assert that no one with a big beam in their eye can see clearly to judge another. Because our flaws leave us with a distorted perspective, we should seek a posture of humility and discernment when forming opinions about other people.

In a recent *Christianity Today* article called "The Science of Humility," the author states, "Humble people flip upside down what comes naturally for most of us—to view ourselves with great generosity and others with suspicion."



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Today, let's pray that God would change our hearts, helping us to see where we are assuming the worst in others. *Lord help us to desire Your truth and to seek Your sanctifying work in our lives and in the lives of those around us.*

## **Friday, October 27 | Matthew 8 | Mary Splawn**

Several years ago, bad weather was forecasted for the church's End of Summer Celebration. It had rained a lot that summer and on Saturday before the Sunday event, the weatherman predicted rain once again! Because I am very involved in the oversight of this event, I was worried. All day Saturday and Sunday morning I questioned whether we should cancel the event. I didn't want to waste the church's money but I also knew what a disappointment it would be to cancel.

Finally Sunday morning came and we as a church staff decided to continue on as planned with the afternoon event. We had been praying fervently for the Lord to change the weather that had been forecasted.

On this particular Sunday, my son Webb rode with me to church for morning services. He and I had begun a fun activity each Sunday where during the drive, he would open his Bible and read a passage to me. He would fan the Bible open and land his finger on a verse or two to read. This day, he opened to Matthew 8:26-27 and read aloud, "'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, 'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!'"

I was flabbergasted because I knew the Lord was speaking to me through His Word. In that moment, I stopped the car and confessed to the Lord, "You are in control." I knew that the attitude of my heart had been one of worry and not trust in the One who has power over all of creation. My cynicism about the potential weather had clouded my sincerity and faith!

I knew then that if it rained, God was in control, and there was a greater purpose I may not ever know. And, if it didn't rain, God was in control! Because, as Webb had taught me that day, even the winds and the waves (and the rains) obey our Lord.

## **Saturday, October 28-Sunday, October 29 | Matthew 5-8**

Reread Matthew 5-8 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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## WEEK THREE: MATTHEW 9-12 AMY JACKSON

### Monday, October 30 | Matthew 9 | Amy Jackson

Last January, I came back from an international trip and just didn't feel right. I attributed it to jet lag for a few days, but I eventually realized that there was something more than just jet lag going on. I had a fever and a terrible cough, and I was absolutely exhausted. When I finally recognized that I was sick, I went to the doctor and started a prescription to help with the sickness (which ended up being bronchitis). The road to health began with me recognizing that I was sick and choosing to visit a physician.

In some ways, Matthew 9 echoes the same sentiment. There's so much irony in this chapter as we see these comparisons between the Pharisees - who are outwardly righteous - and the people they label to be sinners. But Jesus' response to these sinners is music to my ears. He looked upon them and had mercy for them - having compassion for the harassed and hurting in the same way that shepherd cares for his sheep (Matthew 9:36). He called a tax collector to follow Him (Matthew 9:9). He reached out to heal a woman who had been bleeding for years and raised a dead girl to life (Matthew 9:18-25). Jesus came into contact with sinners and with those who would have been considered ceremonially unclean. Rather than shunning them, He embraced them and gave them life in the place of their brokenness.

Jesus came as a savior for sinners and a great physician for those who are sick (Matthew 9:13). The blind men recognized Him (Matthew 9:27), but these religious leaders, the ones who had been waiting for the consolation of Israel and the coming of the Messiah, were blind to Christ's identity and mission. Why couldn't they see Christ for who He was? I think it's because they were blind to their own sickness. Healing can't begin until you recognize that you are ill and that you need a physician. The Pharisees couldn't recognize their need for a savior because they could not see their sickness through the veil of their own self-righteousness.

Unfortunately, like the Pharisees, sometimes we can also be blind to our own sickness and sin. We can tell ourselves that we have everything together and make our lives look suitable on the exterior, while sin wreaks havoc in our hearts. The first step to spiritual healing is to recognize our sickness and brokenness, to acknowledge that we are sinners. The good news is that we have a Great Physician who came to heal those who are sick (Matthew 9:12-13). *Lord, help us to see our need for You, to surrender our pride and our self-righteous tendencies and to come to You for healing!*

### Tuesday, October 31 | Matthew 10:1-25 | Amy Jackson

This first part of Matthew 10 introduces us to the twelve apostles. Sometimes we interchange the titles "apostles" and "disciples." Certainly these twelve apostles were disciples of Jesus - they received His instruction and they learned from Him - but they were also apostles. The Greek word for apostle gives us the picture of someone being sent with a message, a representative or ambassador on behalf of the sending agent.



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We see several things about the men who were sent out as Christ's ambassadors in Matthew 10:1-25. First, just by reading the names and titles, I notice that there's some diversity among the group! The group included several fisherman, a man who was especially zealous for keeping the law (Simon the Zealot), and a tax-collector. While these men may not have naturally associated with one another, their relationship with Jesus connected them together. In the same way, the body of Christ is diverse - and that diversity is beautiful. Each Sunday, we gather together to worship and are invited to sing and pray alongside brothers and sisters who may have once seemed very different from us. But the blood of Jesus unites us - it's a much stronger bond than our education, career path, race, or socioeconomic status.

Second, although these men first would have an exclusive mission to Israel (Matthew 10:6), eventually their work would take them to share the good news with the Gentiles and proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 10:18, Matthew 28:19-20). But proclamation of the gospel often brings persecution, and Jesus warned His disciples of this. Look at the imagery of verse 16 - Christ pictures the disciples being sent out as sheep among wolves - prey among predators! Sheep aren't known for being wise or stealthy; I think that God uses the metaphor of sheep to describe us because we are always in need of a shepherd to lead us. In the same way, the apostles were promised that the Great Shepherd would lead them, even as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death and faced opposition from the government, kings, and even close friends and family (Matthew 10:18, 22-23). Jesus declared that, even in the most terrifying moments, He would be with His apostles and that His Spirit would speak through them (Matthew 10:19-20).

We can be encouraged today that we who have been called by Christ are also His apostles! We join ranks with the fisherman and tax collectors, with the Jews and Gentiles, with the Pauls and Peters of the world. We are sent out to share the good news of the gospel, even to the ends of the earth. And we are promised that, even in the darkest hours, He will never leave or forsake us, leading us as a shepherd leads his sheep.

## **Wednesday, November 1 | Matthew 10:26-42**

Have you ever noticed how many children's medicines are marketed to have a pleasant taste? Great marketing and a little bit of sugar really does help the medicine go down - and it makes kids want to take their vitamins! Well, Christ isn't really trying to "sugarcoat" his message to His disciples as we continue through Matthew 10. He's already warned them about the persecution and opposition they'll face simply because He is their master (Matthew 10:24-25). As He unpacks this further, we read about the inevitability of persecution and even bodily harm (Matthew 10:28). In fact, Jesus reminds the apostles that His primary purpose in coming wasn't to bring temporary earthly peace. He came to upset the status quo and to reconcile humans to God. But this news won't be well-accepted by those who see no need for a Savior, so Christ's message will even bring division among families (Matthew 10:35-37).

If you're like me, you may find these words hard to swallow! Like a yucky-tasting cough syrup, the news of opposition and persecution makes me cringe. Yet even in the midst of this hard news, we see hope. Our hope doesn't rest in how others will react to the good news, or in the false assumption that we won't face



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suffering. Rather, we have hope because we know that we are children of God who are precious in His sight.

I love the imagery of Matthew 10:28-31. Often the poor would purchase sparrows to feed their households. Two sparrows might cost a penny - less than an hour's work wage. And yet God has intimate knowledge of the sparrow. He knows their flights and landings, their births and their deaths. If God has such intimate knowledge of the sparrows, how much more must He know and love His children? God sees our highs and our lows. He sees our moments of triumph and of defeat. He knows our pain and the persecution we will inevitably face. He knows the day when we will breathe our last breath and our physical bodies will die. And we take great hope in the this reminder that God sees and knows our pain, and that nothing is out of His concern or His control (R.T. France, *Matthew*).

So believer, take heart today that God knows you and values you intimately. Will you face suffering? Will you walk through pain? Yes, unfortunately - because we live in a broken world. But we face these things knowing that all things are in His hands, and that more importantly - we are also in His hands. This knowledge gives us the bravery and courage to loudly proclaim the good news of the gospel on every housetop and every hill, on the mountains and in the valleys, in the streets and the suburbs, in the pastures and the tiny towns, in every place until Christ comes again (Matthew 10:27).

## **Thursday, November 2 | Matthew 11**

Have you ever had high expectations for how you thought something might go, only to have the event or outing or day flop? It's easy for me to plan out things in my mind and imagine the course they'll chart, only to be frustrated when my expectations don't meet reality.

One of the themes we see highlighted in the gospels - and especially here in Matthew 11 - is that sometimes Christ doesn't meet our initial expectations. As John the Baptist is in prison - the very man who was called the forerunner, the one who prepared the way of the Lord (Matthew 11:10) - he sent messengers to Jesus, asking if He was the promised one. Perhaps John assumed that, had Christ been the Messiah, he wouldn't be imprisoned for preparing the way for Him.

This was a common thought for many of the Israelites, who were looking for a Messiah to defy the government, grant military power to God's people, and restore the kingdom to Israel. But Jesus confirms that He is the messiah to come by highlighting His fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. Perhaps He hasn't brought military might or physical freedom yet, but the blind have received their sight, the dead are raised to life, and the good news has been preached to the poor (Matthew 11:5-6, Isaiah 61:1-2).

As we read on in Matthew 11, we are reminded how John the Baptist himself and the Old Testament prophets also defied the expectations of the Israelites. The people wanted prophets who cried, "Peace!" and refused to listen to the messages of warning and judgment. In the same way, many of them also rejected Christ. They witnessed His miracles firsthand (Matthew 11:20-24) and yet didn't repent. The



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Israelites in the first-century living in the time of Christ followed a long history of people who missed out on God's activity because His work didn't look the way they thought it should. After all, they rejected John because he didn't dance and drink, and they rejected Christ because He associated with those who did (Matthew 11:19).

It's really easy to get on our high-horses and judge the Israelites, isn't it? How did they miss seeing Christ's work? How were they so blind to the coming of the kingdom, right before their eyes? Yet I think so often my own sin and selfishness cloud my perception. My vision becomes myopic and my expectations for God focus on what I want for Him to do for me. *Oh Lord, help me open my eyes to see You at work - even when my expectations don't meet reality. Give me wisdom to know how to join You in Your work - to proclaim Your good news to those who are weary and heavy laden (Matthew 11:28)!*

## **Friday, November 3 | Matthew 12 | Amy Jackson**

Have you ever noticed how, in relationships, we tend to have the same kind of conflicts repeatedly? Everyone has a few hot-button issues where they see things differently. When we read through the gospels, we noticed that one of the "hot-button" issues for the Pharisees in their relationship with Jesus is the Sabbath. In Matthew 12:1-14, we see this issue come up twice - first, when Jesus and the disciples pluck grain from the fields to eat, and second, when He heals a man. When we read this, we might first wonder if the Pharisees have a point. Isn't the Sabbath supposed to be a day of rest and renewal, and not work? While this is true, the Pharisees' condemnations of Jesus weren't based primarily on Old Testament law but on the Mishnah, where religious leaders had written even more laws to serve as a fence for the Israelites, to keep them from never coming close to breaking God's law. But the problem is that these laws burdened the people rather than giving them rest. The Pharisees treated them as if they were the word of God, even though they weren't.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees in this passage is quite revealing. He gives several arguments to show the Pharisees that He and His disciples aren't violating Sabbath rest. He points out that David ate the Bread of the Presence in the temple, that priests work on the Sabbath, and that God desires mercy instead of sacrifice - He cares more about the intentions of our heart than our outward actions. But Jesus' last argument is the one that infuriates the Pharisees the most (Matthew 12:14). Christ declares that He, the Son of Man, is the Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8).

Why would this be so maddening? Basically, Jesus is telling them that He has the authority to interpret God's law - not the Pharisees. What's more, He is the only one who can interpret and obey God's law perfectly. While the Pharisees were trying to use the issue of the Sabbath to stump Jesus, Christ reminds them that they aren't being true to the heart of the law. Christ alone is the Lord of the Sabbath because the Sabbath is a day for rest and renewal - not for burdens. The disciples eat with Him on the Sabbath as a picture of God's gracious provision for His people (Matthew 12:1, Leviticus 19:9, 23:22). Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath and brings renewal. The problem was that the Pharisees had forgotten the heart of the Sabbath - a day to rest and remember their creator God, and to be reminded that they were not Him. I



# Matthew

think if we were all honest, we could use a little more Sabbath rest - the kind that gives us life, freedom, and renewal as we are reminded that we are fragile and dust.

**Saturday, November 4-Sunday, November 5 | Matthew 9-12**

Reread Matthew 9-12 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



# Matthew

## WEEK FOUR: MATTHEW 13-15 AMY JACKSON

### **Monday, November 6 | Matthew 13:1-23 | Amy Jackson**

Matthew 13 begins what scholars call the “Parabolic Discourse,” a section of the gospel where Jesus teaches primarily through parables. The pastor from my church growing up in Ellenboro, North Carolina often called parables “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” The first parable we see in these verses, which is introduced in Matthew 13:1-9 and explained later in Matthew 13:18-23, is the parable of the sower. It’s a pretty familiar parable for many Christians, but as I was reading it, Jesus’ comments to his disciples sandwiched in-between (Matthew 13:10-17) really stood out to me.

If you can imagine the scene, as Jesus has gained popularity and people have heard rumors of His healing powers, the crowds are swarming! It seems that all of Israel has shown up to see the miracles. While it might appear that they are ready to accept His teaching, Christ takes the disciples aside and goes away from the crowd. He tells the disciples that though the crowd sees and hears, they don’t have spiritual sight, healing, or understanding when it comes the things of the kingdom. Just like the Israelites living in the time of Isaiah (Matthew 13:14-15), their sins and their hardness of heart have kept them from really understanding the heart of God’s message. And for this reason, Jesus begins to speak to them in parables, which the crowd doesn’t understand - rather, the parables are meant for the disciples, the ones who have heard the gospel, who are rich soil for the good seed that has been sown (Matthew 13:23).

Verses 16-17 are the most fascinating to me. While we might be in mourning for the crowd, who have just come for the fireworks and the show and have no spiritual sight, Jesus reminds the disciples of the blessing it is to see Him for who He is and to respond in faith. I have to admit that I don’t often give thanks to God for the blessing of spiritual sight and hearing. If not for grace, I could be among the members of the crowd, with a heart so hardened by sin that I refuse to hear the gospel.

The disciples are also blessed because they have seen, with their very eyes, the fulfillment of all of the prophetic hopes and longings for Israel. The Old Testament saints, men and women faithful to the Lord, pointed forward to a Savior who would come. But the disciples are the ones who got to see Christ face to face, to place their hands in His side and to touch the nail marks on His hands. And one day, we too will join this company of the saints of old, as we behold Christ and are forever transformed by His glory. Our faith will be made sight.

### **Tuesday, November 7 | Matthew 13:24-52 | Amy Jackson**

Sit tight - today we’re reading even more parables! Jesus continues to teach the crowd through these stories; although their hearts are hardened and they cannot understand the parables, the disciples continue to grow in their understanding of the gospel through these tales (Matthew 13:51-52).

Although it’s the shortest parable in this section, the parable of the hidden treasure in Matthew 13:44 caught my attention and really stuck out to me! In the parables, Jesus spoke to the crowd and the disciples



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using stories and imagery that they would understand. Since they didn't have banks or safety deposit boxes like we have today, when people had treasure, often they would put it in a jar and bury it in their field for safekeeping. The Israelites would have been familiar with tales of lost treasure and fortuitous stories like today's, where a man stumbles upon a treasure buried by someone who is likely deceased. This man was probably a day laborer, paid to work on a field. Can you imagine his surprise as he works in the dirt, toiling in the sun, only to discover something that would change his life forever? When he sees the treasure, his response is to go and sell all that he has to obtain it. He realizes that the treasure is more valuable than anything else he might ever possess.

What's the heavenly meaning of this story? When we really encounter the truth of the kingdom of heaven, we'll recognize that it's the greatest treasure of all and our hearts will be compelled, in joy, to surrender everything else. This parable makes me think of Paul's words in Philippians 3. Paul spends some time reminding us of his religious pedigree. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees and was blameless under the law. When it came to religious and social standing, Paul had it all in his circle. But then, like the day laborer in the field, his life was changed forever on the road to Damascus, when he encountered the risen Christ. Paul goes on in Philippians 3:7-11 to explain that he now joyfully counts everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, even in the suffering.

When the truth of the gospel sinks into our hearts, when we understand the treasure of forgiveness we have in Jesus, when we are captivated by the cross, everything else fades away and, in joy, we seek to press on, to hold fast to this treasure, and to follow Christ in joy and loss.

## **Wednesday, November 8 | Matthew 13:53-58 | Amy Jackson**

Is it weird to think that Jesus had a hometown? In Matthew 13:53-58, we read about him going back home to Nazareth. To us, we know who Jesus is - He is fully God and fully man, our Savior and the Perfect One who paid the penalty for our sins. But can you imagine how the residents of Nazareth might have felt? When they looked at Him, they saw the lowly carpenter's son. They saw a poor family. And they saw a kid that they watched grow up before their very eyes.

I have some sympathy for the Nazarenes. It probably felt very odd to see Jesus teaching in the synagogue with such authority and wisdom. Can't you hear the whispering of verses 55 and 56? I think they were probably in utter disbelief at what was happening. Likely they had heard the tales of Jesus' works and miracles, and now they were seeing Him before their very eyes - the same boy they saw grow up in their village. They had such trouble believing in Him and so they rejected Him in the same way that the Israelites rejected the prophets in the Old Testament.

Perhaps the Nazarenes were looking for a political Savior. Maybe they were looking for a Messiah to come and deliver them from Rome. I doubt that they expected their deliverer to come from their very own city, and from this particular family! We're reminded yet again that God does things in unconventional ways.



# Matthew

What's the result of their rejection of Christ? Matthew tells us that Jesus "did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief" (Matthew 13:58). We're reminded again that God works in unconventional ways - often in ways that we would not expect. And we are reminded again that the truth of the gospel brings division. Christ predicted that families would be divided because of His message; we see this division come into His own hometown, where He is rejected and treated without honor. Many Christians today live this reality because their families are not believers. Think of the international students who come to faith on college campuses only to go to home and share this with their parents and face total rejection because of their conversion. At some point in our lives, the gospel will bring some kind of opposition into all of our lives - but the good news is that we stand firm on the promise that He never leaves and never abandons us, even if we are rejected by the people closest to us because of our faith.

## **Thursday, November 9 | Matthew 14 | Amy Jackson**

One of the things I love about the gospels is that they continually affirm both the deity and the humanity of Christ. Yesterday we read about the Nazarenes and their disbelief that this carpenter's son could be the source of all of these miracles. Today, we're confronted with passages that remind us of Christ's deity - that He was fully God, even as He was fully man. He was once a boy in Nazareth, yes, and has now grown to be a man, who has put on flesh for our sakes. But, since the beginning of time, He was also God incarnate. It makes my head hurt a little to think about it, actually!

Matthew 14:22-33 is such a sweet picture of His deity and humanity to me. We see His sovereignty over the waves; He walks out on the water and the winds obey Him (Matthew 14:25, 32-33). And I especially love verse 27. The disciples look out onto the water as Jesus is walking and are terrified! They think they've seen a ghost, but He tells them, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27). The "it is I" of verse 27 echoes God's "I Am" of Exodus 3:14 when Moses encounters the Lord in the burning bush. The very God who created these winds and who spoke the waves into being is standing before the disciples on the water. Like Moses, they too are on holy ground.

And yet we are also reminded that God has come near to the disciples - and to us - in the person of Jesus Christ. He is fully man and has put on flesh as a high priest who knows our brokenness and can sympathize with every weakness. And so he tenderly tells the disciples to take heart in the face of this terror. When Jesus tells them to take heart, He is giving "an assurance for those who have good reason to fear...[the phrase 'take heart'] does not indicate that the crisis is not real, but in the presence of Jesus, fears can be dismissed" (R.T. France, *Matthew*).

I love that, don't you? Jesus doesn't tell us that our fears aren't valid, or that we should put on a smiling face and pretend to be happy. There are hard things we will face as followers of Christ because the world is a broken place. But our hope is in a God who rules over all, who is sovereign over even the waters He created at the beginning of time. And our hope is in a God who has come down to be with us, who knows our pain and our fears, and who commands us to come. And even when we wobble like Peter, He picks us up and draws us to Himself.



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## Friday, November 10 | Matthew 15 | Amy Jackson

As read the gospels, we are reminded that Jesus is a polarizing figure. Ironically, though He came to save the lost sheep of Israel, He offended the religious establishment. They tried to trick Him and test Him, but they refused to believe in Him. On the other hand, we see people encounter Jesus with true faith - and they're not the people we would expect.

In Matthew 15, a Canaanite woman comes to Him and asks that her demon-possessed daughter be healed. She addresses him as Lord, Son of David. While she may not have fully understood what that meant, it seems the Canaanite woman's faith is much greater than that of the Pharisees and scribes (Matthew 15:28). The Pharisees and scribes missed the consolation of Israel. They knew the prophecies backward and forward, but their hearts were so hard that they could not see the Lord standing before them in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we continue on, we see Jesus continue His travels in areas inhabited by Gentiles. I can almost picture the scene of Matthew 15:29-31 as the masses come out to Him to be healed from every ailment. Jesus heals them and as a result "they glorified the God of Israel" (Matthew 15:31). When the lost sheep of Israel refused to believe, Jesus went to the Gentiles. This theme continues in Matthew - in fact, in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands the disciples to go out into all of the world and preach the good news to all people.

I've been working through reading Isaiah in my personal devotional time during this season of writing devotions on Matthew. As I read this passage today, I was reminded of a devotional passage in Isaiah 49:6 that I read earlier this week, where God declares that He is sending His Servant not just to "raise up the tribes of Jacob" but also to be "a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). The rest of the New Testament following the gospels is the picture of the good news of the gospel reaching the ends of the earth.

I'm also reminded that we all have an opportunity to respond to Christ - and there is no in-between. There is no room to just call Him a moral teacher or a good man. As C.S. Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity*, "Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God." While the Pharisees declared Him to be a madman, the Gentiles in today's passage chose to fall at His feet and call Him Lord. What will we choose?

## Saturday, November 11-Sunday, November 12 | Matthew 13-15

Reread Matthew 13-15 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



# Matthew

## WEEK FIVE: MATTHEW 16-20 TIM SANDERLIN & HAYDEN WALKER

### Monday, November 13 | Matthew 16 | Tim Sanderlin

When in college and the teacher asked a softball question, one I could knock out of the park, I was the first to shout it from the mountaintops. Even in a class of 180 plus students, I would confidently reply to my teacher without the slightest hesitation. When it came to Differential Equations class...not a peep. You would have guessed I wasn't even in class. If it got to the point of the teacher calling on unwilling students for answers, you could find me army-crawling through the air-ducts to escape. Humor aside, it's pretty troubling how the circumstances of the questions did not matter, but the question itself and my confidence in the answer had everything to do with my wavering willingness to respond.

When we look at Matthew 16:13-20 we see Christ, the Rabbi, asking His students an important question. The most important question.

"Who do you say I am?"

It is imperative to know that Christ is not looking for affirmation in this question. He is not fishing for compliments from His followers. He knows who He is and whose He is. Jesus wants it to be a reality for them - such a reality that they have no shame or timidity in professing it aloud, in front of God and everyone. Quite literally.

If we look into the passage, we see that "they" replied when Jesus asked who others thought He was (Matthew 16:14), but not so many were eager to speak when Jesus asked them to confess who they believed Him to be.

After Peter gives his profound profession (Matthew 16:16), Jesus blessed him in word, and in bestowing the building of the Church upon his shoulders. Jesus "gives him the keys to the kingdom" (Matthew 16:19). What an honor! What a challenge.

It is foolish to believe that we can do anything to earn God's trust; we break it every day when we choose ourselves over His perfect love! Christ didn't look at Peter and say, "I put my entire kingdom in your hands, Peter, because you've earned it!" Peter would have surely been crushed under the weight. Christ did, however, see a man with mustard-seed faith who answered the question with a surrendered heart and open hands.

When we answer that question "Who is this Jesus?", may our answer be boldly professed as "King of my life and Lord of lords!" Only when we lose our life for His sake will we gain the riches of Heaven (Matthew 16:25).



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*Lord, may that be the question we ask ourselves every morning, and may we boldly answer it proclaiming that you are Lord of all.*

## **Tuesday, November 14 | Matthew 17 | Hayden Walker**

Every so often, a tragic news article will appear in which a person has been injured or killed by their pet lion, tiger, or other exotic animal. Perhaps they had spent years with this animal, but inevitably, their familiarity bred complacency. They forgot that they were dealing with a creature that certainly will not always act in expected ways.

By chapter 17 of Matthew's gospel, the disciples had spent considerable time around Jesus. In many ways, they probably felt that they had a pretty good grasp of who He was and what He was about. In fact, Peter had just confessed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16)

However, Peter did not really understand the complexity of what he had confessed. As he ascended the mountain with James, John, and Jesus, it seems that his familiarity with Jesus did not prepare him for this miraculous encounter. At the top of the mountain, Jesus was transfigured into His glorious state; He remained fully human, but His full divinity became optically apparent.

Is it possible that you and I are often like Peter, believing that we have Jesus figured out? We want Him to fit within our ideas and conventions of who God should be; we don't want to suffer, we don't want Him to call us to hard places, we don't want Him to ask us to share our faith with others. Perhaps we keep Him in a corner of our lives, pray when we need help, and read our Bible when we have the time. Maybe we, like Peter, need to take a fresh look at the untamable and unpredictable majesty of Christ Jesus. Rather than thinking of Him as our vending machine in the sky, there only to serve our needs, what if we looked upon Him as the holy, worthy, even fearsome God who He is? Perhaps we would respond like most people in Scripture, falling face down in worship and humility (Isaiah 6:5; Matthew 17:6; Revelation 4:10-11).

## **Wednesday, November 15 | Matthew 18 | Hayden Walker**

There are many stories in the New Testament that we cherish, but often do not fully understand, as the original audience would have. One such story is that of the lost lamb, found here in Matthew 18:12-14. You know the story: a shepherd has 100 sheep grazing on a mountain, and one goes missing. He seeks out the lost sheep and rejoices when he finds it!

However, there are certainly echoes of the Old Testament in this parable that communicate something about the current state of religion and the character of God. A quick glance back to Ezekiel 34 will remind you that God was quite angry about His people, whom He referred to as His sheep, not being properly fed by the shepherds, or religious authorities, of the day. (Ezekiel 34:1-10). God promised that He would tend to His sheep Himself, gather, and feed them good things (Ezekiel 34:11-31).



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Undoubtedly, Jesus was painting the religious leaders of His day as negligent shepherds. Instead of leaving His people alone, God himself came down in the person of Christ to save us and restore us. He traveled the great distance, not down a mountain, but down from heaven, to find us. He knew that it was impossible for us to be restored to God, without being carried back by his own nail-pierced hands. And we are no light load: an adult sheep is in view here, not a lamb. Sheep can weigh up to 350 pounds! The good shepherd is willing to bear this excessive weight over a long distance to bring the sheep back into the fold. The weight of our sin was so great, and yet our Good Shepherd was willing to bear that weight for us upon the cross. Praise God today that He thought you, a wild rebellious sheep, worthy of rescue by the Good Shepherd!

## **Thursday, November 16 | Matthew 19 | Hayden Walker**

What is one great achievement that you worked really hard to obtain? Perhaps it was a diploma, for which you had to take many classes, study hard, and make good grades. Maybe you are proud of a team that you are or were a part of, which you qualified for based on your skill and ability. You could have even obtained a high rank in an organization or company by reaching certain benchmarks. Whatever the achievement, you inevitably feel a certain sense of pride because you know how hard you worked to get there!

In our passage today, a rich young man approaches Jesus with a question most of us have probably asked at some point in our lives: "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). Notice that the man did not ask what he must believe, but what he must do. It appears that he felt he could earn eternal life, work really hard, and meet the necessary requirements for entrance into the kingdom of God.

In fact, he confirmed with Jesus that he had kept a laundry list of commandments. Jesus then stuck him where it hurt: he commanded the young man to give away all of his possessions, and come to follow Him. As we read this, we may at first believe that we must relinquish all earthly goods for the sake of the kingdom. However, I think Jesus is concerned with something deeper: the young man's heart. The man's sorrowful response to Jesus' command clearly shows us that he loved his possessions (Matthew 19:22). His belongings had crept into a place of authority and idolatry in his heart that superseded his desire for the kingdom of God.

As we consider the good blessings God has placed in our lives, may we be always mindful of our human proclivity to believe that we could earn or salvation, or the tendency to place people, things, or achievements on the throne of our hearts instead of Jesus.

## **Friday, November 17 | Matthew 20 | Hayden Walker**

Matthew 20 concludes with the story of Jesus healing the eyes of two blind men. These two men could not see Jesus approaching, but when they heard that he was passing by, they cried out to him (Matthew 20:30). Even when the crowd rebuked them, they continued to cry out for healing!

I am captivated that the men referred to Jesus as the "Son of David." This seems to accentuate His humanity. Jesus, though fully the Son of God, is also fully human. He can therefore empathize with the



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brokenness of our condition, even physical ailments and pains. The famous Christmas carol "O Holy Night" has a verse that says, "He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger!" When you and I cry out to God from the midst of our pain and brokenness, we can be assured that He will respond just as he did to these two blind men: in pity and compassion (Matthew 20:34).

Now this certainly does not mean that we will always be physically healed as they were. But we are always offered the inner peace, healing, and hope that comes from trusting in Jesus.

These men were keenly aware of their need for Jesus' touch. Their condition was physical and could not be ignored. However, as we have been reading through Matthew's gospel, we have encountered person after person who is afflicted by spiritual blindness. This spiritual condition is more dangerous and fatal than any physical brokenness. May God give us an awareness of the blindness in our hearts, that we may cry out to Him and be healed by His touch.

## **Saturday, November 18-Sunday, November 19 | Matthew 16-20**

Reread Matthew 16-20 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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## WEEK SIX: MATTHEW 21-24 WAYNE SPLAWN

### **Monday, November 20 | Matthew 21:1-22 | Wayne Splawn**

Matthew's account of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-19 has long fascinated me. According to the commentaries I have read on this passage, figs would not have been in season in the spring of the year, which was the time when Jesus would have ridden into Jerusalem for the Passover. So, it is very odd that the fig tree described in these verses would have leaves as Matthew describes. For this reason, it attracts Jesus' attention and he decides to see if the tree is bearing figs in a manner that would be consistent with the appearance of the tree. However, upon closer inspection, the tree is found to be fruitless. Jesus then curses the tree, declaring that it will never again bear fruit. What are we to take from this strange encounter between Jesus and a deceptively unfruitful fig tree?

It seems clear that Matthew is warning his reader against following the sinful example of the religious authorities of Jesus' day. On the outside, they looked appeared to have a genuine concern for holiness and a zeal for religious observance. However, if one were to take a closer look at their lives, they would find their lives to be devoid of the grace, love, and mercy that should characterize the life of every sincere follower of God. Rather than bearing fruit for the kingdom of God, these religious authorities were merely keeping up the appearances of religion.

The truth of this passage should lead us to examine our own lives. Are we bearing spiritual fruit or merely going through the motions of religion so that others will think more highly of us than they ought? Take a close look at your life today. Ask God to show you whether you are engaging in the externals of religion while having a heart that is far from him. May you and I be disciples of Jesus Christ who bear spiritual fruit that is consistent with our outward appearance.

### **Tuesday, November 21 | Matthew 21:23-46 | Wayne Splawn**

Political correctness is a powerful force in our world today. As we engage in conversations, we are often tempted to say what we think will be most acceptable to others in hopes we do not offend anyone. We certainly should be grateful for the peace and civility we enjoy when our speech is measured and unnecessarily offensive. However, if we are not careful, this tendency to craft our words to please others may lead us to hide our convictions due to our fear of people. When this happens, you and I will find it nearly impossible to faithfully bear witness to the aspects of our Christian faith many find offensive.

The chief priests and elders Matthew describes here in Matthew 21:23-27 were certainly controlled by their fear of people. Rather than say what they thought to be true concerning John the Baptist, the chief priests and elders were silenced before the crowd. They would not act in a way that was consistent with their convictions. Or, to put it more accurately, they were so controlled by the opinions of others, they no longer had any convictions.



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In our own day, we may find it increasingly difficult to speak in a way that is consistent with the truth of Scripture and acceptable to others. We must certainly measure our words and do everything we can to be kind and winsome when we talk about our Christian faith. But, we must also resist the temptation to be silent if we are motivated primarily by the fear of what other people will think. If we do not, we may eventually get to a place where we no longer have any meaningful convictions to share.

## **Wednesday, November 22 | Matthew 22 | Wayne Splawn**

The fall semester is now well underway in schools across our area. From primary schools to college campuses students are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. However, we all know that students do not apply themselves equally to all subjects. For subjects they like the least, they usually do just enough to get by. On the other hand, if a person is truly captivated by a subject, he or she often exceeds a teacher's expectations and requirements because of their genuine love for a particular discipline. When we love something, we no longer worry about satisfying minimal requirements in order to earn a passing grade. Instead, our love compels us to go above and beyond.

The same is true in our love for God and people. In Matthew 22:36, a lawyer asks Jesus to identify the great commandment in the law. Jesus responds by pointing him to Deuteronomy 6:5, which highlights the importance of a faithful believer loving God with everything they have. Then, Jesus offers a second command that he says is like the first. This command from Leviticus 19:18 focuses on the importance of loving others like ourselves. What are the greatest commands? Love God and love other people. These commands are essential to our pursuit of knowing and living for Christ because they illuminate the emotion that must provide the motivation for all our attempts at obeying God. A loveless pursuit of obedience may inspire us to do many things others would deem heroic, but in the end we will have gained nothing (1 Corinthians 13:3).

How are you doing in your attempts to obey God? Does obedience seem like drudgery? Are you going through the motions of Christianity, but experiencing little joy? It may be that you need to refocus on the importance of loving God with your whole heart and loving others like you love yourself. Rather than allowing your pursuit of living for Christ to devolve into a joyless attempt to go through the motions of faith, ask God to fill you with a deep love for him, a love that would compel you to pursue a type of obedience that far exceeds doing just enough to get by.

## **Thursday, November 23 | Matthew 23 | Wayne Splawn**

What would be the most hurtful thing someone could call you? There may be a few things that come to mind, but I would venture to guess "hypocrite" might be toward the top of most of our lists. After all, as a rule, we value sincerity. In a world full of phonies and fakes, we admire and strive to be people who are genuine.

Here in Matthew 23, Jesus repeatedly accuses the Pharisees and scribes of being hypocrites. They valued seats of honor and positions of privilege in the community. They required others to adhere to rules and



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regulations they had no intentions of following. They tithed small garden herbs, but neglected the pursuit of mercy, justice, and faithfulness. They appeared to be holy in terms of following the smallest jot and tittle of the ceremonial law, but they were actually sanctimonious fakes. And Jesus calls them out in front of everyone.

It would be easy for us to read Matthew 23 and have feelings of deep disdain for the Pharisees and scribes or to even develop a running list of people we know who are just like them. But, a more healthy approach to reading this passage would be to allow the shortcomings of the Pharisees and scribes to serve as a catalyst for introspection. How have we allowed the intoxicating applause of men to spur us on to pursue places of honor rather than humbling ourselves and trusting that God will exalt us? How have we held others to a higher standard of righteousness than we are willing to pursue? How have we focused on our ability to keep the more insignificant regulations of the law while neglecting the weightier matters of faithfulness, mercy, and justice? How have we sought to keep up our appearances in order to hide the uncleanness in our hearts?

If you are like me, reflecting on such questions is a challenging exercise. I am reminded of how far short I often fall of God's perfect standard of righteousness and how much I need the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. And, I am also reminded of how willing God is to extend His love and mercy to me through Jesus Christ. A recognition of God's love and the unfathomable grace He has extended to me through Jesus Christ awakens in me a deeper love for Him and a desire to genuinely live for the Lord. Let's be followers of Jesus who refuse to put on a show for others or ask others to do the same. Let's be transparent about our shortcomings and extend grace to others when they share their failings with us. And let's encourage one another to pursue a life of genuine holiness and righteousness as we seek to faithfully bear witness the life-transforming love God has extended to us through Jesus Christ.

## **Friday, November 24 | Matthew 24 | Wayne Splawn**

I think it would be difficult to be a backup quarterback. Chances are, he will never touch the field in a real game, but he has to prepare each week on the outside chance the starting quarterback is injured and unable to complete the game. It would be easy for the backup quarterback to be lulled to sleep by sitting on the bench week after week, thinking he will never see the field. But, if he takes such an approach to preparation, he will not be ready should his opportunity to play arise.

In Matthew 24, Jesus issues His disciples an important reminder about staying awake and being prepared. This passage of Scripture can be confusing as Jesus mixes teachings about the destruction of the Temple, which occurred in 70 AD, with instructions about other things that will occur at the end of time as we know it. Biblical scholars are often divided in their interpretations of this section of Jesus' teaching, but one thing that is crystal clear is Jesus' warning to His disciples to stay awake as they await for His second coming. In verses 45-51, Jesus uses the imagery of the faithful and wise servant who remains vigilant about his master's business in his master's absence as a picture of the faithful disciple who continues to live according to Jesus' teaching in His absence. The message is clear. You and I must live as if Jesus is coming back today. If



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Jesus were to return today, would He find us obediently pursuing His will? Ask the Lord to give you a renewed sense of the truth that Jesus will one day return to this earth unexpectedly and give you the grace you need to stay awake and faithfully pursue His will in the meantime.

**Saturday, November 25-Sunday, November 26 | Matthew 21-24**

Reread Matthew 21-24 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



# Matthew

## WEEK SEVEN: MATTHEW 25-28 WAYNE SPLAWN

### **Monday, November 27 | Matthew 25 | Wayne Splawn**

It is tragic when people squander tremendous amounts of God-given talent. Most of us can hardly watch when an exceptionally gifted business person, scholar, athlete, or musician throws away his or her chance to accomplish things most of us could only dream of achieving. We assure ourselves that we would not waste such an opportunity if we were in their shoes.

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells a parable that should cause each of us to examine our lives to determine if we are wasting the blessings God has entrusted to us. In the parable, Jesus tells of a man who entrusted his servants with varying amounts of money in proportion to their abilities. One received five talents, another received two talents, and the final servant received one talent. The first servant invested his five talents and made five talents more. The second invested his two talents and also increased his talents twofold. But, the servant who received one talent was afraid he would lose his master's money, so he dug a hole and hid his money in the ground. Obviously, the last servant did not make a profit.

When the master returns, the servants provide reports concerning what they did with the money entrusted to them. The master tells each of the first two servants, "Well done, good and faithful servant," when he sees that they have made a profit with their money. The third servant presents his one talent back to the master. Why did he take such a strategy? He says that he was afraid he would lose the talent, so he decided to hide it rather than risk losing it. The master scolds the worthless servant and casts him into a place of judgement.

Where do we find ourselves in this parable? I think each of us would admit that the Lord has entrusted much to us. So, we must ask whether we are doing our best to invest these resources to advance the kingdom of God or if we are merely sitting on them until Christ returns. Are we spending these resources on ourselves rather than utilizing them for the advancement of God's kingdom here on earth? May God give us the grace we need to leverage all He has entrusted to us to further the gospel in our community, nation, and world.

### **Tuesday, November 28 | Matthew 26:1-35 | Wayne Splawn**

In Matthew 26:6-13, we read of one woman's extravagant act of devotion. As a crowd is gathered with Jesus at the house of Simon the leper, this unnamed woman comes in and anoints Jesus' head with a flask of very expensive ointment. It would have been customary for a host to anoint the head of a guest, but this woman's use of very expensive ointment goes far beyond what was standard. Matthew notes that the disciples were indignant with the woman for wasting the ointment in this way. After all, they reasonably conclude, the ointment could have been sold and the profit could have been used to care for the poor. I would venture to guess many of us would have shared this view had we been in the room that day.



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Jesus assesses the woman's act of devotion much differently. Instead of scolding the woman, Jesus says that she has done a beautiful thing that will be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed. Matthew's inclusion of this beautiful, extravagant act of devotion serves as a reminder and challenge to all of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus. First, it is a reminder that we should be wary of second guessing the motives of those who offer Jesus acts of devotion that seem outlandish to us. It may be that Jesus would wholeheartedly approve of gifts we would deem wasteful. Second, it is a challenge for us to consider whether we are ever so moved by the grace God has lavished on us through Jesus Christ that we feel compelled to offer Christ an act of worship some would describe as extravagant.

## **Wednesday, November 29 | Matthew 26:36-75 | Wayne Splawn**

In Matthew 26:31-32, Jesus tells the disciples that they will all fall away from Him when persecution comes. Peter hears Jesus' prediction of the disciples' impending desertion and adamantly proclaims he will never leave Jesus' side. Even if all the other disciples turn and run, Peter is confident that he will stick with Jesus through thick and thin.

In Matthew 26:36-46, it becomes apparent to the reader that Jesus' assessment of the disciples was an accurate one. Jesus asks the disciples to watch while He prays in the garden of Gethsemane, but the disciples fall asleep. Peter had said he would remain faithful to Jesus to the very end and Jesus notes that Peter is not even able to watch with Him one hour. Why? Because even though Peter's spirit was willing, his flesh was weak (Matthew 26:41). In Matthew 26:69-75, Peter denies Jesus three times as Jesus said he would and when the rooster crows, Peter is reminded of Jesus' prophetic words. All Peter can do is go out from that place and weep bitterly.

The disciples' actions here in Matthew 26 serve as an important reminder that we should never trust in our own ability to remain faithful to Jesus Christ. Today, there may be things you think you would never do in the future. Perhaps you are confident in your ability to remain faithful to Christ just as Peter was. But, the same thing that was true of Peter and the other disciples is true of us - our spirit is willing, but our flesh is often weak. So, rather than being confident in our ability to remain faithful to Jesus, we would do well to acknowledge our capacity to be unfaithful and to ask God to give us the power to remain faithful to Him in the days ahead. Rather than being overly confident, we must acknowledge our need and walk in daily dependence upon the Lord.

## **Thursday, November 30 | Matthew 27 | Wayne Splawn**

It is impossible to adequately capture the importance of everything Matthew records here in Matthew 27. This is the climactic event toward which everything in Matthew's story of Jesus' life and ministry has been building. I have read the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion many times over the years, but I as I was reading it in preparation for writing this devotion, it was the mockery Jesus endured at the hands of His enemies that stood out to me the most. I do not mean to minimize the pain Jesus endured as He was scourged, tortured, and ultimately killed on the cross. It was one of the most painful forms of execution ever devised in the



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history of the world. But, in addition to being painful, crucifixion was also meant to humiliate the person who had been condemned to die. In Matthew 27:27-44, Matthew highlights the ways in which those gathered to witness Jesus' crucifixion mocked Him. They spit on Him. They dressed Him up as a king and derisively lauded him to be the King of the Jews. People in the crowd taunted Him, implying that if He were really a king, He should be able to save Himself. According to Matthew's account, even the criminals who were crucified on either side of Him ridiculed Him.

How did Jesus respond? For the most part, Jesus remained silent. He did not defend himself against their false accusations. He endured the most unjust punishment in the history of the world, not using the power at His disposal to set Himself free or silence the taunts of the crowd. Why? Jesus submitted His will to the will of His father so that through His death you and I might know eternal life. I would encourage you to read Matthew 27 in its entirety a few times throughout the day today and reflect on all that Jesus endured on your behalf. Ask God to give you a renewed appreciation of the horrors and mockery Jesus endured so that you might be reconciled to God the Father and be granted the gift of eternal life.

## **Friday, December 1 | Matthew 28 | Wayne Splawn**

If Matthew's gospel concluded with chapter 27, there would be no good news to proclaim (1 Corinthians 15). But, thanks be to God, Matthew's gospel extends to chapter 28, where we read Matthew's account of Jesus' resurrection! I would encourage you to read Matthew 28 and 1 Corinthians 15 today and ponder the importance of Jesus' resurrection. When God raised Jesus from the dead, He defeated death, hell, and the grave and secured for us our salvation. No matter what you may be facing, you can know hope and joy because of the reality of Jesus' resurrection. This is a message that must be shared with the people of all nations. May God fill us with the joy of the gospel so that we might faithfully proclaim the good news of what God has done through Christ even to the ends of the earth, confident that Jesus will be with us even unto the end of the age.

## **Saturday, December 2-Sunday, December 3 | Matthew 25-28**

Reread Matthew 25-28 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.