

Gospel of Matthew

Devotional

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Note: this is a draft copy in need of editing

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Matthew 1

Matthew begins with a genealogy. It's opening statement reminds us of the book of Genesis. From one angle we can read that entire book as one long genealogy. It's structured by the phrase "these are the generations of..." And so we move through history genealogically: from Adam, through Noah, to Abraham, etc.

Just as the Bible began with a long genealogy, so now it's story ends with a genealogy. From the first Adam to the last Adam—everything has come full circle.

But this genealogy does not begin with Adam. It begins with Abraham. That's because Matthew's Gospel was written primarily to a Jewish audience. Many of the first Christians were Jewish. But most Jews refused to accept Christ because they did not want to give up their cultural and religious traditions. That was a big deal. If you were a Jew, your entire national, family, and personal identity was tied up in the ancient customs. Accepting Christ meant leaving Judaism. By starting his gospel with a genealogy, Matthew is trying to show the Jews that their entire identity from Abraham, to David, to the exile is only meaningful in Christ. It is only in whom all the promises of the old covenant are fulfilled.

But how do you the significance of this genealogy goes beyond that general point. What further can we say about it?

First, the genealogy is a stylized genealogy. In verse 17 it tells us that it is structured around three groups of 14 generations, headed by three figures and eras: Abraham, David, and the Exile.

Secondly, this structure also indicates it's a genealogy of fullness in that through Christ things have come to completion. In order to see this, we have to do a little redemptive-historical math. Each 14 represents two "sevens": $7+7 = 14$. If we have three groups of 14 that means we have six sevens. In the Bible, the number "seven" is the number of fullness, completion, and Sabbath rest. In doing this Matthew was indicating that Jewish history (by itself and apart from Christ) does not bring the final and complete promises of God. It's only in Jesus that they will reach the fullness of God's completed blessing. He brings the seventh seven of God's final rest.

Thirdly, we also know from the structure that it is a royal genealogy. We see that clearly enough with David, who is clearly identified as "the king" in 1:6. But we also see it in the section devoted to the "exile to Babylon." The names listed here are those in the kingly line that was in danger of going into extinction when both the northern and southern kingdoms

had been destroyed and the people scattered. It's a sign that God was faithful to his promise to not let the lamp of David be snuffed out.

But we also see the royal element in Abraham. Part of God's promise to him was that he would be a blessing to the world and that kings would come from him. His son Judah had a special promise that "the scepter would not depart" from his tribe. These were prophecies of Jesus, the coming king. In other words, the genealogy is teaching us that a king has come. We must bow the knee to him and submit to his will in our lives.

Fourthly, the genealogy is also a reminder that this king comes to save sinners. As you look through the list of names you'll see a few brief little comments and annotations interjected by Matthew. Whenever he does this it seems connected with some episode of great sin in the life of his people. For example, in verse 2c, he mentions "Judah and his brothers". That brings to mind the evil that both Judah and his brothers did Joseph. After that it tells us that Judah was the "father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar." Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law. Judah slept with her thinking she was a prostitute (yuk!). Not exactly a genealogy of "holy fathers." In verse 6 it says that "David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." That recalls the infamous incident of David's adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband. The mention of the "deportation to Babylon" only reminds us of the evil of the human heart on a grander scale, is that era represents a wide scale rebellion in apostasy by God's own people.

But to this sinful people God sent a Savior. To "Joseph, son of David" he sent a message that a king was coming. That king would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and thus free his human nature from any taint of his fathers' evil. And the name of this king is "Jesus," because "he will save his people from their sins." This people include not just sinners from among the Jews, but from among all the nations of the earth. If we are to have this king as our own and be members of his kingdom, we must first acknowledge our participation in the shared sinfulness of mankind. We must repent and believe in the good news that the kingdom of God has come in him.

Matthew 2

Matthew 1 tells us the story of the origins and birth of Jesus. For the most part, the picture is fairly peaceful. Yes, there is some tension and uncertainty regarding the pregnancy of Mary given her virginity, but that is fairly quickly cleared up by the angel messenger.

In Matthew 2 that peaceful tranquility is shattered. It is clear that this Christ child has not come into a peaceful world, but one of war, conflict, and suffering. These are things he would experience from his first days on earth.

The dramatic tension of the chapter orbits around two sets of characters: Herod and the wise men (Magi). They both have one thing in common: they search carefully, diligently, and persistently for the Christ-child. But they do so for very different reasons.

On the surface they look similar in their search for Jesus. Note how Herod outwardly proclaims: “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him” (2:8). This seems to correspond with the words of the wise men: “where is he who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (2:2). Ostensibly, both have the same stated goal: to worship the Christ. Both are pursuing it with similar zeal: searching diligently! Ironically, the wise men seem to be following pagan astrological principles current in the East. I hope it’s obvious that Matthew does not endorse astrology, but it does point to how God providentially use that foolishness to bring the wise men to Jesus (but see the prophecy in Num. 24:17). In contrast this, Herod actually consults biblical revelation to aid him in his search. In this respect it may seem that Herod has better theology than the wise men!

But when we look deeper, how different they are! The wise men wished to find Jesus so that they could worship him. Herod wishes to find Jesus so he can kill him. When the wise men find Jesus, they rejoice exceedingly and with great joy. When Herod cannot find the Jesus, he becomes furious and orders all male children in Bethlehem two years and younger killed.

For this reason his father and mother flee to Egypt. The Magi from the east brought into view the area of Babylon, which was a place of suffering and judgment. The flight to Egypt also brings into view a location of suffering. But it also reminds us of God’s great work of redemption through the power of God and the Passover Lamb. Just as God’s firstborn son (Israel) in Egypt suffered in slavery, so God’s eternal firstborn son will suffer in this world and bring redemption to his people.

So it is for those who are in Christ. Our lives in this world are filled with conflict. There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who reject Christ and wish him destroyed, and those who embrace him as the Savior. There are those who acknowledge their sins, repent, and have forgiveness. And there are those that pursue power, status, and the things of this world, destroying everything that gets in their way. To embrace Jesus is to embrace the pattern of his life in this world. If we make it our singular aim to worship and honor him, we will be caught up in the conflict of the forces of light and darkness. Our lives here will be ones of sojourning and trial. But God will one day deliver us and bring us safely to the Promised Land.

Matthew 3

In this chapter we read of the ministry of John the Baptist. We often refer to him as the “forerunner“ of the Christ. John’s ministry was fundamentally preparatory. As Isaiah prophesied, he is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: *prepare* the way of the Lord; make his paths straight” (Is. 40:3).

How do God’s people prepare for the coming Messiah? The answer lies in one word: repentance.

Repentance is a gracious work of God in our hearts. In it we not only acknowledge our sins, but eagerly turn from them. Instead of approaching sin as something enjoyable to satisfy our sinful desires, we see it as that which grieves the Holy Spirit and displeases God. We therefore turn from it with grief and hatred. We sorrow not only because of the consequences of our sin, but because of the sin itself and the evil heart from which it flows. In turning from our sin we turn to God, and we do so with confidence that through Christ we will apprehend his mercy when we repent. When we sin against others and repent, we expect nothing in return. We do not appeal to our alleged repentance as a way to manipulate others, nor do we see it as a meritorious work that “deserves” anything from God or man. Instead, we say with the prodigal son: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.“ Although it is the obligation of every believe to forgive others, a truly repentant person believes that they do not deserve to be forgiven. This means that that they will take responsibility for the hurts their sins have caused. If the people against whom they sin struggle with forgiveness, the repentant do not hold this against them. It is only when we have this kind of heart that we have been truly prepared to receive Christ.

Sin twists, distorts, and corrupts God’s righteousness. That’s why we refer to evil people “crooked.” Repentance is that by which we straighten out our wickedness. The valleys are exalted. The mountains and hills are made low. The crooked path is made straight and the rough places a plain.

This ministry of repentance was signified and sealed in a special sacrament of baptism. On the one hand, the waters of baptism symbolized the internal, spiritual washing we must undergo to truly repent and be cleansed from our sins. But on a deeper level baptism represents the idea of judgment. We don’t have the space in a devotional to get into all the details, but throughout the Bible the theme of water is connected with judgment. The world was judged with a flood. Pharaoh and his armies were judged in the waters of the Red Sea. Both events are likened to baptism in the NT (1 Cor. 10:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:20-21). Jesus later refers

to his crucifixion (the way he endured judgment for us) as a “baptism“ he must undergo (Mark 10:38). This this baptism involves not just water, but also fire.

That’s why John prophesies that the mightier one who will come after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

This is the point to which Matthew is driving us: everyone will undergo the fire of judgment. We will either go through that fire by ourselves and be burned, or we will go through with another and be saved. The fire of judgment is thus extinguished through the waters of Christ’s baptism.

The glorious truth of this chapter is this: Jesus is the only one in whom we can endure the fires of judgment and come through safely.

We know this because Jesus himself was baptized with John’s baptism of repentance. For many, this is a very puzzling passage. How is it that the sinless Savior needs to be baptized? If the baptism symbolizes repentance, and repentance presupposes sin, how can Jesus submit to it? Does this imply that Jesus is a sinner?

If that’s a question that comes to mind, you are in good company. It’s the exact question that John the Baptist asked when Jesus came to him to be baptized!

Jesus had no sin of his own. But he did have our sins upon him. The reason for Jesus’ baptism lies in the fact that although he had no sin from himself, he came to be our sin bearer. Although he did not deserve judgment, he bore the judgment that we deserved. He took the fire of our judgment upon himself vicariously so that through him we might instead have the good pleasure and love of God in our hearts.

How then are we to live in him? The same way we were born in him: repentance! There is one great test of whether we are walking faithfully in Christ: are we living a life of repentance? Do we mourn our sins and shortcomings? Are we willing to acknowledge where we have done wrong? Are we desirous of having true change in our lives?

Or are we simply consumed with a desire to defend ourselves in our own righteousness? When confronted with our sins do we stubbornly resist and turn on those seeking to point us in a more God-glorifying direction?

Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but *sinners* to repentance. He did not come as a physician for those who are well, but for those who are sick. In repentance we acknowledge our sickness. In repentance we acknowledge our sinfulness. Our sinfulness and sickness is obvious to God and to others around us. It is our sinful pride that causes us to resist.

If we are to enter the kingdom and receive the promised Christ there is only one path we can walk—the path of repentance and preparation for the Lord!

Matthew 4

In this chapter Matthew begins his survey of Jesus's public ministry. Technically speaking, his public ministry begins with his baptism. But his first official act of ministry is to endure temptation for our sakes.

Much of what we read here has several parallels to the first temptation in paradise. Just as Satan tempted the first Adam, he also tempts the second Adam. Just as Satan twisted God's word in the beginning of history with Eve, so also he twists God's word at the end of history with Jesus.

There are clear parallels between the "first" and "last" temptations. If we had space we could outline several more.

But there are also notable differences.

First, Adam was tempted in a garden, but Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. This points the fact that Christ came into a sinful world filled with suffering and misery. We often think that the miseries we experience in this life are unfair to us. Most Christians wouldn't dare verbally accuse God of being unfair. But we do often accuse the people around us of being unfair to us. If we're honest with ourselves, I think most of us have to admit that our real issue is with the Lord!

Then we spend most of our time finding ways to alleviate our sufferings in this sinful world. Some of those ways are righteous and noble. People become firefighters and police officers to serve and protect their fellow citizens. Some engage in medical research or become doctors to alleviate the physical symptoms that result from sin. Other paths are sinful and destructive. People consume drugs and alcohol to numb themselves to the suffering of this life, but end up creating exponentially more for themselves and their families. Others plunge headlong into satisfying their sinful cravings. But they will never have enough: all the waters flow to the ocean, but the ocean is never full!

It's no surprise, then, that Satan's temptations have this singular focus—to convince Jesus that there is a way to obtain the end of his work without trial and suffering.

In the first temptation, Satan focuses on Christ's suffering in terms of his hunger. "Make these stones become bread!" With his divine power Jesus would be able to quickly alleviate this symptom of suffering. What a contrast between Adam and Jesus! Adam was tempted in a garden where nearly every fruit was available to satisfy his appetite. Jesus is tempted in a

wilderness where with no food for 40 days and 40 nights. But to answer Satan's call would be to compromise the essence of his work as the Messiah: to suffer for his people.

In the second temptation, Satan takes a different angle. Realizing that Jesus has accepted the call to suffer, he tries to lure him down a false path of hardship. He takes him to the pinnacle of the Temple and says: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down..." The problem here is not the recognition that Jesus will put his own life in danger. Obviously, he will willingly give up his life on the cross. The issue here is that if Jesus were to follow Satan's path, he would be inventing his own way of enduring suffering. Instead must Jesus follow the way of his God: not my will but thy, will be done!

In the final temptation, Satan sets before Jesus a way to obtain his ultimate goal that totally removes him from suffering. If he will just bow down and worship Satan all the kingdoms of the earth will be his! That was the end goal of Jesus's work. After his death and resurrection he would be seated at the right hand of the Father. All power, rule, and authority would be committed to him. Satan offers him the same thing—only without the cross!

Thankfully Jesus defeated the tempter and embraced the God-ordained path of suffering. Through him we have victory over Satan and his tyranny in our lives.

At the same time Christ's temptations are a reminder that in Christ we are called to a similar path of suffering. We will be tempted at every step along that path to find ways to alleviate those sufferings. At times Satan will tempt us to abandon our Christian calling to avoid them. Let us be wise to his ways, always keeping watch and praying: "... Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

Matthew 5

This chapter contains the opening section of Jesus's famous "Sermon on the Mount." It is rightly famous for its strong moral-ethical component. But we cannot look at this sermon as merely a lesson on ethics. The "Beatitudes" with which Jesus begins the sermon couches this moral teaching in the broader context of the kingdom of God.

Notice how the Beatitudes begin and end with a reference to this "kingdom of God." It is a "inclusio" that surrounds and defines everything said in between. In the final analysis, the only way the moral life outlined here can be pursued is if our hope is firmly fixed in heaven above. The Sermon on the Mount is not to be viewed as an ethical guidebook for prosperity and success in this world. Instead, it teaches us how we are to live a life of self-denial and sacrifice that we might enter the world to come.

This is particularly evident in the call to rejoice while being persecuted, to offer the other cheek to the one who strikes you, etc. These are manifestations of self-denial: we sacrifice the present for the sake of the future. We lose our lives in this world for the sake of the world to come. That's why Jesus at times uses graphic hyperbole: if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.

Christianity does not teach that suffering, *per se*, is a good thing. Suffering for suffering's sake is asceticism and is condemned by the Bible (1 Tim. 4:3). Likewise, it does not commend us when we suffer for our wrongdoing. If we suffer as murderer or a meddler we are not doing something exceptional. We are far too quick to make ourselves martyrs when we're really just getting what our sins deserve (see 1 Pet. 4:15). Instead, when called to suffer for the sake of God we can do it patiently and joyfully because our hope is not in this world. The troubles of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come

In addition to this heaven-focused aspect of the kingdom, Jesus's sermon also highlights its penetrating character into the hearts of men. In other words, Jesus not only points us upward to heaven, but also inward to the depths of our heart. In this, Jesus' exposes the external, formal righteousness endemic to the church leaders of his day. The commandment "you shall not commit adultery" is violated not merely in the act of committing sexual sin outside of marriage. It involves the thoughts and lustful intent of our hearts. Murder is not just a physical act to take the life of another. It finds its ultimate origin in the sinful heart and the unrighteous anger that flows from it.

It goes without saying that this passage makes clear that we are all murderers and adulterers! Our sinful hearts are full of these things. Our only hope is in the forgiving and cleansing grace of the kingdom that Jesus brings.

Matthew 6

Matthew 6 continues Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The heart of this section is contained in 6:20-21: "...lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Acts of religious devotion like fasting, giving to the needy, prayer, etc. are said to be ideally done in "secret." There men cannot observe and praise you for your works. The focus is entirely on God as the ultimate object of our devotion. Jesus is not, of course, absolutely condemning public acts of giving or public prayer. If he were, he would be contradicting himself as he prayed publicly and commanded that public prayers be offered in church services.

Instead he is addressing the motivation of the heart. We must ask ourselves: are we doing these things to be seen and heard by others, or are we doing them with an eye toward God?

Or think of it this way in your own life. Do you do acts of goodness and love hoping to get credit from others? Are you angry and mad if you don't get the credit you think you "deserve?" Or do you get mad if somebody else gets credit for something you did? I'm not saying we shouldn't seek to give credit and thanks to those who have done such things. But if our hearts are set up on pleasing God, and we have faith in him, would we not so value the praise of God that we care nothing about who receives the praise of man?

Jesus words have never been more relevant than in this "social media" age. Our whole reality has been re-shaped to revolve around likes and dislikes in the public arena. Our entire way have interacting has been redefined according to the allure of the praises of men. The fact that this devotion is being posted to social media means it's some thing that I need to take to heart as well.

This has to do with where our "treasure" is. Treasure is something we value. The treasure in the passage is the praise and pleasure of God. If we value that above all things we will do nothing that gets in the way of him receiving all the glory— even if it means that we suffer "injustice" or that which is "not fair" in this world.

It is recognized by even non-Christians that a good leader won't care who gets credit for success. In fact, he will be quick to give the credit to others. This can only be truly done from a Christian perspective, where our true treasure is eternal in the heavens and centered upon God.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 7

Matthew 7 concludes Jesus's rightfully famous "Sermon on the Mount." Each subsection is so profound it is worthy of a lengthy meditation on its own.

If there is anything that approaches a unifying theme, its verse 20: "Thus shall you recognize them by their fruits."

The sermon began in Matthew 5:16 with an exhortation to let our "light shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." In 5:17 Jesus tells us that our righteousness "must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees" to enter the kingdom. That means a real, inward embrace of the commands of God in our motives and inclinations. It also means doing more than "talking the talk." There must be real fruit in our lives.

In the first section, the necessity of this good fruit is seen in how we approach others. One tempting path of spiritual self-deception is to only apply God's word to others. Jesus calls this "taking the speck" out of your brother's eye. Doing this quickly gives one the false sense that they are engaged in a spiritual exercise that makes them right before God. But the real fruit of being in God's kingdom is when we apply God's word to ourselves. Let me speak in person terms: as a member of the kingdom of God, I need to put way more emphasis on my own sins than on the sins of others. I must view the sins in myself as "logs" and the sins of others as "specks." This can only come from a thoroughly God-centered mindset. Our focus is not on how we compare to others, but how we compare to God.

The next major section deals with prayer. The true fruit of God's kingdom is to realize one's need for grace. That mindset is manifested in prayer. If we view prayer as a "work" we must do to earn points with God, we are looking at it totally backward. We pray because we need. Our motive to go to our Heavenly Father in prayer lies in two great things. On God's part, we pray because of his worthiness, glory, and greatness. On our part, we pray because we are in desperate need of God's grace.

False prophets and true saints can thus be recognized by their fruits. Those fruits are not just external acts, but works of faith done from a cleansed heart focused on God's glory. Many have done amazing acts of ministry—from prophecy, to miracles, to exorcism—but without a heart of true faith. This is a good reminder to put far less stock in a handful of "major" efforts we think we are doing for God, and much more emphasis on small, consistent, less visible acts of love and devotion.

When the rains fall, the true character of this fruit will be exposed. The faithful will stand firm, but the faithless will be swept away in utter destruction.

This is the life of those who are members of God's kingdom. We live even now before his eternal presence. Our focus is on him and the power, grace, and blessedness of the kingdom he brings.

Matthew 8

Matthew 8 describes the events right after Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. In general, Jesus's teaching and authority is accompanied by mighty acts which ratify his authority as a messenger of God. His words are accompanied by acts, and his acts are explained with words. We see several miracles that do this very thing: Jesus' cleansing of the leper the healing of the centurion's servant, and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Each story accents a different aspect of Jesus' work and the proper response to it.

With both the leper and Peter's mother-in-law Jesus heals with a "touch." Both have communicable diseases! He is showing us that he came to carry our sins and bear our diseases. He takes our death and misery and replaces it with his life. Matthew even cites Isaiah 53:4 in case we miss the point: "he took our illnesses and bore our diseases."

Theologically speaking, these miracles point to the vicarious nature of Christ's work. This refers to the fact that Christ came to do something in the place of another. Think of all of our sins and miseries is something you could put in a backpack. Jesus takes our backpack of sin and misery and carries it to the cross.

With both the leper and the centurion we see different aspect of Christ's work: the necessity of faith in Christ's willingness and ability to save. This is seen in the words of the leper: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." Ability without willingness is useless. Willingness without ability is empty. We need both in our Savior.

The chapter ends with some of the mightiest miracles of Christ: the calming of the storms of the sea and the casting of demons into a herd of pigs. The power of the Creator-God is evident in Jesus, and the one who has authority over the kingdom of darkness.

The only power greater than death is in the one who overcame it for our sakes: Jesus, the risen King. To enter his kingdom we must realize that although we are impotent against this great enemy, by his omnipotent power he will overcome it.

Matthew 9

Matthew 9 contains a collection of miracle stories as performed by Jesus.

The one unifying theme of the chapter is the authority of Christ as King and Lord.

The coming of Jesus marked the beginning of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is the king of that kingdom. Thus the idea of authority is central to his message and work.

Jesus's healing of the paralytic occurred by an authoritative word: "Rise, take up your bed, and walk." This demonstrated that Jesus had authority on earth to forgive sins. The one who can miraculously remove the effect of sin (paralysis) can also remove the guilt of our sins in justification.

Jesus's authority is also seen in the call of Matthew. There is no discussion or debate. Jesus simply declares: "follow me." Matthew gets up and follows Jesus. In both this scene and the previous one, Jesus's authority is established over against the scribes and Pharisees. The same narrative thread is picked up later in Jesus's response to the disciples of John. Their question is a challenge to Jesus, although it is expressed in a more deferential form. Jesus answer shows that he is greater than John. His answers to both John's disciples and the Pharisees are the final, authoritative word.

Interestingly, in the next story it tells us that "a ruler" came to Jesus to beg him to his daughter. A ruler is a figure with authority. Yet he is powerless to help his daughter. This "ruler" knows that a greater ruler has come--one who has authority over sickness and death.

Likewise, the two blind men who wish to receive their sight refer to him as "son of David." This is a royal title underscoring his authority from God.

Jesus has authority: authority over the demons to cast them out of whomsoever he wills. He has authority over sickness and death, banish him in them through his miracle-working power. Jesus has the authority to call whomever he wills to be his disciples and make them laborers in his vineyard.

Jesus is the king. He has the authority. Do we really believe that? The measure of our faith is found in our actions. Do we live according to our wills or to the will of God? Is the motivating force of our lives what we want, or what God wants? Do we try to bend and force people around us into the mold we wish them to be? Or do we willingly submit ourselves to God, accepting how he wishes to mold and shape us into what he wants us to be?

Jesus is the king. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. To be his faithful followers, we must bend our wills to his.

Matthew 10

Matthew's Gospel alternates between the mighty works and the mighty words of Jesus. In other words, it alternates between Jesus's miracles and teaching. If you have a "red letter" Bible, this will stand out to you. In chapter 10 we return to another section containing the mighty words of Christ. The chapter is preoccupied with Jesus' instruction to the 12 disciples after he gives them authority to perform miracles and demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God.

We might quickly skip over this passage as irrelevant to us. After all, we are not apostles. We have not been given the same special authority to work miracles. But there is a principle here that it is extremely important to our lives as Christians. This principle is that of delegated authority in the kingdom of God. We are not apostles, but we are all Christians. Through his Holy Spirit he has anointed us that we might share in his power. Through his death and resurrection Applied to us by faith, the power of Christ is at work to renew and enliven us. Likewise, although there are no apostles today he has delegated his authority to officers in his church. Christ works through pastors, elders, and deacons to show his love and shepherding care. But he also does this through the individual members of the church, who each have a gift from Christ to serve the body in love. In each of these ways, Christ has delegated his authority and gifts that the body might build itself up through him.

At this point in his public ministry, Jesus's focus is upon the "lost sheep of Israel." Later the focus would move to the Gentiles. During this period the disciples are going to experience a great hardship for the sake of the kingdom. It's a pretty clear emphasis of Jesus's words in the chapter. On the one hand, it is important to appreciate the specificity of the application of this passage. He is speaking directly to the 12 disciples and their ministry during their lifetime to the Jewish people. It is not as if every Christian should expect this degree of persecution and every time in every place.

At the same time, there is a general principle here that remains true. We will face opposition in living and speaking about the kingdom of God. Jesus is quite blunt about this: "...And you will be hated by all men for my name's sake." We live in a time where our culture has moved far beyond seeing Christianity as a positive force in the world. Today the prevailing powers in our culture largely view Christianity as a force that is inherently evil. For this reason, it's important to know that Jesus's warning to expect persecution is coupled with the promise of reward in the form of eternal life. Whatever we lose in this life we will keep for eternal life.

Another verse appears in this chapter that is important to our understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. Matthew 10:20 states: "...for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." In context, it has immediate application to the disciples'

verbal speech before kings and governors before whom they will give an account of the kingdom of God.

By extension, it also applies to the apostolic letters. Those are simply written versions of the same things they would say verbally in the churches. Jesus's promise means that in their ministry of the word it was not them who are speaking, but the Holy Spirit speaking in them.

The Bible is not the words of men, but the very words of God. It is true that there is a human agency in revelation. Every individual author's unique personality, form of speech, language, etc. is seen in the different letters. But in the final analysis, there is only one "author" and source of revelation: God himself.

Matthew's Gospel alternates between the mighty works and the mighty words of Jesus. In other words, it alternates between Jesus's miracles and teaching. If you have a "red letter" Bible, this will stand out to you. In chapter 10 we return to another section containing the mighty words of Christ. The chapter is preoccupied with Jesus' instruction to the 12 disciples after he gives them authority to perform miracles and demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God.

We might quickly skip over this passage as irrelevant to us. After all, we are not apostles. We have not been given the same special authority to work miracles. But there is a principle here that it is extremely important to our lives as Christians. This principle is that of delegated authority in the kingdom of God. We are not apostles, but we are all Christians. Through his Holy Spirit he has anointed us that we might share in his power. Through his death and resurrection Applied to us by faith, the power of Christ is at work to renew and enliven us. Likewise, although there are no apostles today he has delegated his authority to officers in his church. Christ works through pastors, elders, and deacons to show his love and shepherding care. But he also does this through the individual members of the church, who each have a gift from Christ to serve the body in love. In each of these ways, Christ has delegated his authority and gifts that the body might build itself up through him.

At this point in his public ministry, Jesus's focus is upon the "lost sheep of Israel." Later the focus would move to the Gentiles. During this period the disciples are going to experience a great hardship for the sake of the kingdom. It's a pretty clear emphasis of Jesus's words in the chapter. On the one hand, it is important to appreciate the specificity of the application of this passage. He is speaking directly to the 12 disciples and their ministry during their lifetime to the Jewish people. It is not as if every Christian should expect this degree of persecution and every time in every place.

At the same time, there is a general principle here that remains true. We will face opposition in living and speaking about the kingdom of God. Jesus is quite blunt about this: "...And you will be hated by all men for my name's sake." We live in a time where our culture has moved far beyond seeing Christianity as a positive force in the world. Today the prevailing powers in our culture largely view Christianity as a force that is inherently evil. For this reason, it's important to know that Jesus's warning to expect persecution is coupled with the promise of reward in the form of eternal life. Whatever we lose in this life we will keep for eternal life.

Another verse appears in this chapter that is important to our understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. Matthew 10:20 states: "...for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." In context, it has immediate application to the disciples' verbal speech before kings and governors before whom they will give an account of the kingdom of God.

By extension, it also applies to the apostolic letters. Those are simply written versions of the same things they would say verbally in the churches. Jesus's promise means that in their ministry of the word it was not them who are speaking, but the Holy Spirit speaking in them.

The Bible is not the words of men, but the very words of God. It is true that there is a human agency in revelation. Every individual author's unique personality, form of speech, language, etc. is seen in the different letters. But in the final analysis, there is only one "author" and source of revelation: God himself.

Matthew 11

Matthew 11 continues this section of the Gospel preoccupied with a series of the teachings of Jesus. Remember that Matthew's Gospel flip flops between recording the mighty *works* and mighty *words* of Jesus.

In this section, his emphasis is on confirming that the kingdom of God has come. On the one hand, this may seem like an unnecessary theological emphasis at this point in history. Is it not clear that Jesus is the Messiah? Has not the spread of the Gospel to the nations given ample evidence of this point?

Our need for this confirmation is not primarily theoretical. Its necessity is a practical one. The members of that kingdom will experience hardships in this life. We are in most need of reassurance when things are troublesome. Christian suffering is a grand test of our faith in the kingdom of God. God's kingdom promises us blessedness and freedom from sin. But now these are invisible realities grasped by faith. What we see and feel is the pain of our trials. These things are in tension with one another. That is why we need the Scripture's confirmation that the kingdom of God has come! Despite what we see with our eyes of flesh, our eyes of faith know that God reigns at all times.

Even John the Baptist wavers a bit here. Jesus points to the clear evidence of God's kingdom in their midst as seen in his miracles and mighty works.

Those who do not respond in faith are like those who act inappropriately at different occasions. They are like someone who mourns at a wedding or sings songs of joy at a funeral. They are blind to the kingdom that has come in Jesus.

Likewise, woe is pronounced upon Chorazin and Bethsaida for refusing to repent and believe in the light of the Messiah's clear coming. They will suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah or Tyre and Sidon (infamously wicked, pagan places). While they would have repented if they beheld such mighty works, these towns did not. Again, the emphasis is on the confirmatory evidence that God's kingdom has arrived.

The final section reveals the ultimate reason why some see the mystery of the kingdom and some do not. It ultimately traces back to God's sovereign eternal decision. He has hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to the foolish. No one can have a saving knowledge of the Son and the Father unless they are among those handed over from the Father to the Son. Those that do have their eyes opened find rest and comfort in Christ's saving, Shepherding arms.

God's kingdom is in our midst! What good news for Christian sojourners. May that kingdom complete its work in our lives, that we may daily say: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done!"

Matthew 12

Sometimes it's difficult to condense an entire Bible chapter to one singular point. I think Matthew 12 is one such chapter. But if we were to identify a single theme, it would be this: the kingdom of Jesus brings us true rest.

This is most clearly seen in the first two stories of the chapter, both of which deal with Jesus in relationship to the Sabbath. Jesus himself kept the Sabbath as God intended and encouraged others to do the same. However, he rejected the legalistic Approach of the Pharisees and scribes. Ironically, they turned the day of rest into a day of extra burdens and man-made regulations. The day of freedom became a day of slavery.

The 10 Commandments appear in two places of the Old Testament: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. In Exodus, the sabbath commandment is rooted in God's work of creation. For six days he created the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day, he rested (Exodus 20:11). In Deuteronomy the grounds are different. Instead of creation, Moses appeals to the work of redemption. Although there were at one time in slavery in Egypt, God set them free and gave them rest (Deuteronomy 5:15). The Sabbath is thus closely connected to liberation from sin and the tyranny of the devil.

Under the power of sin and Satan, there is no rest. Perhaps that's one reason why Jesus speaks somewhat cryptically of the demons those who "...pass through watery places seeking rest but find none" (12:44).

It's also why the chapter includes stories illustrating Jesus's power to free his children from the power of demons. The devil is a slave master and a brutal one at that! What great mercy of Jesus to free his people from such bondage. True liberation is found in freedom from the devil's kingdom.

The connection between rest and liberation is also seen in Matthew's reference to the Servant of the Lord prophesied in Isaiah and cited at length in Matthew 12:18-21. The justice he brings flows out of heaven and transcends earthly circumstances. It brings us out of earthly conflict to find rest in an eternal God.

Jesus comes as a deliverer to free us from bondage to sin. He frees us from its guilt in justification, canceling our debt and forgiving our sins. But he also frees us from the enslaving power of sin in our regeneration and sanctification. We live to bear fruit to God (12:33-36) and show that we are his true spiritual children (12:46-50).

To truly rest in Christ to rest from our sinful ways, and put our trust and hope entirely in him. For Jesus says: “Come to me all you who are weary and heavenly laden...and I will give you rest.”

Matthew 13

Matthew 13 contains a number of the “seed parables” as taught by Jesus. The Parable of the Sower is perhaps the most famous. The four types of seeds (the path, rocky ground, thorns, good soil) can ultimately be boiled down to two: good and bad.

The three "bad" seeds are uprooted and exposed because of different occasions of hardship or temptation.

Interestingly, these occasions for stumbling/temptation represented in the seeds are reflected (in principle) in the lives of Jesus's disciples. Judas was like the seed sown on the path—the devil snatched it away and led him to betray Christ. Peter is like the seed on the rocky ground: he temporarily wavers at the threat of persecution (see his confession of Jesus as the Christ, his rebuke by Christ after predicting his own death, not to mention his threefold denial of Christ before the cross!). Judas, too, also was tempted by riches and was paid off with thirty pieces of silver.

In the end, all except Judas proved themselves to have that good soil of the Holy Spirit in their heart, and would bear a hundredfold fruit in their ministries.

Interestingly, sandwiched between the telling and explanation of the parable is a description of their ultimate purpose: they both reveal and conceal the mystery of the kingdom. The parable is told to all, but the explanation is only given to the disciples. Those who know the mystery and secret of the kingdom can understand, but the rest cannot. It is up to God's sovereign decision as to who will believe and who will not (see his previous statement about revealing these things to children, but hiding them from the wise).

The next parable outlines the intermixture of the wheat and the weeds in the growth of the kingdom. Jesus explains that this describes the intermixture of believers and unbelievers in the church until the coming of Christ. Some do not think this applies to the church because of Jesus's statement in 13:38 that “the field is the world.” But this is best explained as a reference to the church as a worldwide body. It is described here simply the “world” because at this time one of the key issues for God's people was whether the church would be limited to Jews/Israelites. Jesus is making clear that the church will stretch beyond all national borders.

The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price highlight the surpassing value of the kingdom, and the need to leave all to pursue it. This is a really significant point. In the church we have an eternal treasure in earthen vessels. The church is filled with sins, shortcomings, disappointments, frustrations, and weakness. It is easy to become

overwhelmed with these troubles and become discontent or want to quit. We have to remember that within this weak, sinful, and broken vessel God has placed a treasure of infinite value. The only way we can be joyful in the midst of these things is to recognize the all-surpassing value of the kingdom of heaven.

The parable of the fish and the net return to the eschatological focus of the previous parables. In other words, it sets us at the end of the age when the "good" and the "bad" will be sorted out. The church has been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. They are to discern as best as they are able between a true and false profession of Christianity. But we are not God and cannot have absolute proof of God's election when examining others. The church is to look in this age for what we call a "credible profession of faith." We cannot infallibly determine who is truly a Christian and who is not. That will be revealed at the end. For now, we must accept people into the church based on a credible profession of saving faith. That judgment has been entrusted to the elders of each local church as they receive and dismiss members.

Matthew 14

The call of the Gospel has two sides to it. On the one hand, Jesus calls us to a kingdom of blessedness and glory that far exceeds anything we can imagine in this life. As the last chapter indicated, it is like that treasure hidden in the field or the pearl of great value described in 13:43-44. When a man finds it, he sells all that he has to obtain it.

The blessings of the kingdom are so great they are not worth comparing to anything we currently possess. For where else shall we find the blessings of forgiveness, cleansing from sins, renewal of our hearts, and eternal life?

On the other hand, the Gospel also calls us to expect suffering and hardship in this life for Christ and in Christ. The examples of this in the Gospels are too numerous to count. The most famous comes in Jesus' words to the disciples, that they must take up a cross and follow him.

This is a tension in the life of the believer. He is always vacillating between his joy at the greatness of the kingdom of heaven, and his sorrow at the trials and miseries of life in this sinful world. Both are constantly competing for his focus and attention. To focus on one brings joy, satisfaction, patience, and a life of love. The other brings misery, bitterness, complaining, doubt, and despair

Whenever we are faced with suffering for hardship for Christ's sake, the only solution is to reflect directly on the greatness and power of the kingdom of heaven of which we are members through him. (On a day in which many of us will spend time reflecting on the greatness and blessing of being a member of the earthly country, we would do well to consider the greatness of the kingdom of Christ!).

This applies to all kinds of difficulties that we face. It concerns not only that which is directly "spiritual," but also those hardships we face in ordinary life. Jesus refers to these things as "the cares of this life" in the parable of the sower. How often we are tempted to complain against those around us and even against God for the daily struggles of life that we face! These also are enveloped in the call to embrace trial for Christ's sake. We need to look at them through the same theological paradigm outlined in this chapter of the Gospel.

This chapter begins with a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus at the end of this book. At first glance, there may be few parallels between the death of Jesus and the death of John the Baptist. After all, one died by beheading and the other by crucifixion. At first glance, they seem very different at first. Close examination, however, reveals that there are a

number of parallels in the details. Herod himself mistakes Jesus for John the Baptist raised from the dead! Other more subtle parallels include the following: both are put to death by political figures who are reluctant because they "fear of the people" and are manipulated by lesser players, both are spoken of as "prophets" (14:5), and both figures bodies are taken up by the disciples and buried after their death (14:12). Moreover, all the Gospel writers take pains to point out that John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus preparing the way for him. This is to not only in his proclamation in life, but also in his execution and death. Perhaps this is why Jesus is so troubled by the death of John. He sees in it a foreshadowing of what will happen to him. There is no greater trial than death. Amazingly, Jesus' response is to continue to Reveal the power and the greatness of the kingdom of heaven in mighty signs and wonders.

Is it not amazing to behold the love of Jesus in action! Although he at first withdraws for a brief time, when the crowds follow him, he continues to minister to them. Having lost a close friend, and seeing a preview of what will happen to him, it would be certainly understandable if Jesus would prefer not to have the crowds around him. But in his great love, he continues to put the needs of others before his own.

The subsequent miracles underscore the greatness and power of the kingdom in the face of serious trial and suffering. In the feeding of the 5000, we see that the food of this kingdom is so great that once you eat it you will never be hungry again. In Jesus walking on the water, we see that Jesus is the sovereign creator who holds even the wind and the waves in his hands. When storms of trial come, we can find refuge in him through faith. Indeed, even those with but a little faith in the "fringe of his garment" (14:36) find all that they need for this life and the life to come.

Each day is filled with many trials, and sometimes they are filled with great upheaval and storms. Speaking personally, the older I get these trials only seem to increase! In such times we do well to reflect again on the greatness of the kingdom of which we are members by the grace of Jesus.

That is the only thing that can motivate us to persevere. If it only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most to be pitied.

Matthew 15

The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus's day were highly regarded by the people. They were serious, sober-minded, and dedicated to their religious cause. They were careful stewards of the Jewish faith and held to the traditions of their fathers with pious dedication. They were the last people in the world you would think of as unclean or unholy.

But Jesus tells us plainly in these passages that although outwardly they looked like polished white marble, within they were filled with the filth and uncleanness of sin.

The human heart: that is where true defilement is found. It is not what goes into our stomachs that makes us unclean, but what comes out of our hearts.

How easy it is to deceive ourselves in this matter, especially if we are in families and churches that (rightly) emphasize the importance of the outward means of grace (church attendance, devotional Bible reading, prayer, etc). It is so easy to think that because of the things we are *doing* we are cleansing ourselves before God. The real issue is that of our hearts. We may honor God with our lips, but our hearts may be far from him!

What a powerful picture of this true cleanness we have represented in the story of the Canaanite woman. Externally she is unclean by Jewish standards. She is from an unclean city (Tyre and Sidon). She has an unclean family heritage (Canaanite). Her daughter has an unclean spirit. Jesus tests her by reminding her that by Jewish standards she is not an heir of the grace he brings and is like an unclean dog (!). Yet she does not stumble by taking offense. Instead, she embraces the humiliating image so that she might even grasp a crumb of God's grace.

How could she do this? She knew two things. First, she understood the depths of the uncleanness of her own heart. She took no offense at being called a dog. The Bible goes further and declares: "I am a worm and not a man." She is not offended by such language because she knows the true filthiness of her sinful heart.

But secondly, she also knows the greatness of the grace of Jesus. He came to take away the filth and uncleanness of our sins. We see this pictured in the many miracles referenced in the chapter, performed on the lame, blind, crippled, mute, and many others. Power goes out from Jesus and he heals them. In so doing he absorbs them into himself. He bears their sins and carries their diseases.

He also feeds us with the bread of heaven. He nourishes us to eternal life. He is our sin-bearer. He takes our uncleanness and gives us his cleanness. He takes away the rotten heart of sin and replaces it with a heart renewed by the Spirit.

Nothing less than that will suffice to be admitted to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Matthew 16

Matthew 16 covers a lot of ground. It begins with a warning against the “leaven” of the scribes and Pharisees. They seek signs even though they have received many. Their refusal to believe only exposes their hardness of hearts. The “leaven” is their teaching. As Matthew 15 explained, the Pharisees and scribes have added many human commandments to the word of God. Although a form of Biblical truth is found in their religious devotion, they deny its true power. They honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from God.

The true teaching is being revealed in and through Jesus. His word is the unleavened bread of God’s truth. Peter is slowly beginning to comprehend it. This revelation centers upon Jesus as the promised Christ and Savior of sinners. Flesh and blood do not reveal it—only the Father in heaven. Peter sees it and confesses it: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

This revelation is the foundation of Christ’s church. Faith in Christ is the solid rock on which he stands.

Ironically, although Peter takes these words upon his lips, his heart does not yet fully understand it. After boldly proclaiming Jesus to be Christ, he immediately stumbles over the very stone he just confessed. Peter wants the power of Christ’s Messiahship without the sufferings of his cross.

But we can never separate these two. Christ is the risen king only because he was first a suffering servant. If we are to follow Jesus, we must take up our cross and follow him. Earlier in the narrative, we saw how Satan tempted Jesus by giving him a way to take the kingdom without suffering. Jesus recognized his ways reappearing in Peter’s words. Peter would fail again when he denied his suffering Savior on the cross. But he would be restored again to shepherd Christ’s sheep.

We have the same struggle. We want Christ’s glory but shun his cross. The cross is the only path to glory.

Matthew 17

The previous chapter had a strong, corrective tone. Jesus rebuked Peter. He had very good reason to do this. Peter had essentially denied the heart and core of his work when he rejected the idea that the Christ would suffer, be crucified, and after three days rise again.

Jesus rightly recognized this as the spirit of Satan. Just as he had tempted him to avoid sufferings during his forty days of fasting in the wilderness, so he has reappeared again at that "opportune time" he had long waited for.

After correction comes reaffirmation. Having just revealed his future suffering and death, Jesus knows the confusion of the disciples. In this chapter, he once again reminds them of his impending death but also reasserts his Messianic power and glory in dramatic, revelatory acts. Although the suffering of Christ have come as a surprise, they have rightly recognized that he is the Son of God.

The first of these is what we call the "Transfiguration." He takes Peter, James, and John on a mountain with him. In their presence, his appearance is transfigured. His face shines like the light and his clothes become white. This is a preview of how he will appear in his exalted glory. The apostle John who is present in this scene will see later see Jesus in the same way in his revelation of Christ on the Island of Patmos (Revelation 1).

To ratify this supremacy of his glory, both Moses and Elijah appear with him. These are the two great figures of Old Testament history, representing the Law and the Prophets. Additionally, the voice of the Father himself resounds before them, testifying to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God.

After this, he heals a boy with a demon. Interestingly, the man brings him first to the disciples, but they are unable to cast him out. When Jesus rebukes the demon it comes out of him instantly. Again, the story reinforces the supremacy of the power and glory of Jesus as the Messianic king.

The disciples need this reminder. They have begun to stumble over the great stumbling stone: the cross of Jesus. The only way to bear the cross is to see beyond it to the glory that will follow. Both they and we are of "little faith" and easily overwhelmed at the prospect of losing something in this life.

This is not just manifested in the big picture of our Christian lives, but in the small, day to day aspects of our relationships. In every interaction we are faced with a decision: will we

die to ourselves and serve others, or will we work to have others serve us? Death to self is contrary to our natures. Our instincts are for self-preservation and self-exaltation.

Christ calls us to something different. He sets before us a world to come that is far more glorious and wonderful than anything we can imagine on this earth. The only way we can daily bear the cross is if we see clearly the greatness of that glory to come. The things of this world will then appear as nothing, and we can willingly consecrate them to the service of Christ.

This is the path to which Jesus calls us. It is also the one he walked before us: "...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2).

Matthew 18

If anything was made clear in the previous chapter, it is the fact that Jesus is the greatest. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus appeared with both Moses and Elijah. These are the two greatest figures of the Old Testament era. Yet Jesus's glory outshone both of them. Moses's face reflected the glory of God. Christ himself was the source of the glory revealed to him in the tent of meeting. Elijah had a Spirit of power. That Spirit was the Spirit of Christ. Jesus is clearly the greatest.

It was also made clear that Jesus is greater than his disciples. A man came up to Jesus whose son was demon-possessed, and the disciples were unable to cast him out. What the disciples could not do--weak in their faith--Jesus did through his all-surpassing Messianic power.

Given the emphasis this point received, it is beyond baffling that chapter 18 would begin with a debate among the disciples. The answer to this question is irrelevant, and at best a huge distraction. They should not be comparing themselves to one another, but to Christ and to God.

These represent two different approaches to life. In the first, we measure ourselves by others around us, constantly comparing ourselves to others. When we do this we vacillate between arrogance (when we believe we are better than others) and self-conscious misery (when we think others are better than us). The reality is the difference between ourselves and others pale in significance between the difference between all of us and God. One candle might be slightly brighter than another, but when you hold them both in line with the sun the difference completely disappears.

That's why Jesus calls the disciples to become like children.

They must humble themselves *before God* to enter the kingdom. God loves the weak, not just the strong. He goes after the one lost sheep, leaving the ninety-nine. That sounds nice, but imagine how the ninety-nine feel? Did the shepherd love the one more than the rest? Why do they not get the attention he devotes to the one stray sheep? Life with the good shepherd requires great humility before God. We cannot measure ourselves by others, but only by God.

I think this is why Matthew provides this specific context for Jesus's instruction on conflict resolution and the need to forgive the repentant. We will always be tempted to think of ourselves as better and more significant than others. We will often be tempted to think that our works are better, our minds are smarter, our hurts are more serious, etc.

In short, we will be tempted to think that we are the greatest in the kingdom.

But this was not the way of Jesus. Even though he was the greatest, he became the least. Although he was the most worthy of love and attention, he instead gave these to others. Although he received no comfort in mistreatment, he comforts the mistreated.

He who was the greatest in the kingdom became the least so that we who are least in the kingdom might become heirs of him.

Matthew 19

Matthew has been emphasizing some simple points. First, Jesus is the greatest. No one compares to him. He is worthy of our entire lives. Second, if we are to follow him we must therefore submit ourselves to him and humble ourselves. We do this when we repent and acknowledge our sins to him in order to receive his forgiveness. We also do this when we forgive others from the heart when they sin again us.

This is the heart of the Christian life. It requires taking up a cross and dying to self that Christ might live in us.

Interestingly Matthew 19 begins with Jesus's teaching on divorce. In it Jesus reinforces the two key points outlined above. First, he establishes his greater authority by correcting the Jewish views on divorce and remarriage. They appealed to an Old Testament provision designed to mitigate the effects of sin as if it endorsed the sin itself. Jesus reasserts God's design for marriage from creation: one man and one woman in life-long marital union and communion. To be sure, the world is still sinful. But Jesus provides only a very narrow set of circumstances where a marriage can be lawfully dissolved: death, adultery, and (through Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 7) willful desertion.

Jesus establishes his greater authority in reestablishing God's truth, but he also reinforces our need to die to self. There is no area of life where our sinfulness and need for self-humiliation are more evident than in our marriages. In a way, the disciples recognize this, although they clearly do not like it, asserting: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (10). If marriage is for life and even in some of its most miserable manifestations (the very narrow exceptions for dissolution notwithstanding), then it would be better not to marry!

The truth is, the disciples words betray an attitude that is the opposite of the kingdom of heaven. Marriage requires us to humble ourselves. We have to be willing to become like children all over again. That's why Jesus's teaching on marriage is followed by the statement: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (19:14). This passage does far more than reassert God's promise to be God to us and to our children (precious and important though that promise be). The whole scene serves as a vivid reminder our the humiliation necessary to follow Christ and enter the kingdom.

To enter the kingdom and to live it out in our lives (Especially in marriage) we have to become like children. How? Children don't know how to do many things, and they are very aware of this. They are far more willing to ask for help and instruction than are

adults. Adults become proud. We think we know best. We get angry, irritated, and feel patronized when others instruct us (even when we need it).

I think this is especially true for us in our marriages. When we are single we think we know how to love others. We think we are patient, kind, and courteous. But when the pressures of marriage and family life hit us, we realize we have not even begun to scratch the surface. Its as if we have to relearn how to be a Christian all over again.

I think a similar point is being made with the rich young ruler. He had sought to honor God from his youth, but he did so while possessing great wealth. Jesus calls him to empty himself and give it all away that he might have treasure in heaven. But he goes away sad, not realizing that his earthly goods are nothing next to the treasure of heaven.

If we are to follow Jesus, we must recognize the greatness of the King and the all-surpassing value of the kingdom of heaven. When we see this clearly, we will be able to joyfully walk the path of self-humiliation and suffering. Who weeps at losing a few pennies in order to gain a billion dollars?

Thankfully as we walk this path, we have one who has gone before us to help us. He was rich but became poor. He was the king but became the servant. He was God but became flesh. He was filled with all blessedness but touched our misery. He knew no sin but bore our sins. He took our death and gave us life. He was exalted but humbled himself. The first became last and gave his life as a ransom for many.

Matthew 20

In the previous chapters, we have seen the greatness of Jesus and the lowliness of the disciples. If we are to follow Christ, we must deny ourselves, pick up the cross, and follow him. In other words, we must humble ourselves, trusting that God will exalt us.

That theme continues in Matthew 20. The first section contains the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The gist of the story is that every laborer gets paid the same (by mutual agreement) no matter how long they work. Those who worked longer hours feel they have not been dealt with justly because they were paid the same as those who worked fewer. The truth is, the master did no wrong. He was fair to the first and generous to the others.

God is gracious. We delight in that grace when we receive it for ourselves. But when others receive God's grace in a greater measure it is very easy to begrudge him in jealousy.

When we do so, we are reverting back to works righteousness. We deserve nothing from God. Rather than being mad that someone else received 10 when we only receive 5, we should be thankful for what we have. We all deserve none!

This attitude requires self-denial and self-humiliation. God does not distribute his gifts equally. In the outworking of his grace, he gives greater care and attention to some than to others. As Paul says about the church as a body, the less honorable parts are treated with greater honor. Whatever our position, we must trust that he is providing for our needs and for the greater body of which we are part.

The request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee makes it clear that the disciples still don't get this point. They are preoccupied with which of them will be the greatest. The fact is, the one who is truly the greatest is right before their eyes. Even though he was the Lord, he became the servant. Even though he was the greatest, he became the least.

The chapter ends with the healing of two blind men. I believe this healing is a visible picture of what must happen to every disciple. We are spiritually blind to Christ's greatness and can't see past our own ego. We are filled with self-importance and often so short-sighted we fail to grasp the importance and greatness of the kingdom of God.

Matthew 21

In Matthew 21 we begin with the Triumphal Entry.

Everything in this chapter proclaims that Jesus is the King. The location indicates kingship--Jerusalem, the city of David. The commandeering of the colt bespeaks kingship--only the one who owns the realm (the "Lord") can lawfully do this. The prophetic fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, the cries of the crowd, and many other details point in the same direction.

Ironically, a crowd of people here joyfully proclaim Christ to be the king. A short time later, a crowd will condemn him as a criminal and proclaim, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

The rest of the chapter similarly emphasizes Jesus's authority as king. He cleanses the temple with regal authority. He curses the fig tree and it withers at his mere word. The chief priests and elders explicitly question his authority (21:23). He is the master of the vineyard who has found no fruit in Israel. He is the king who has all authority.

But how does he use this authority? By taking our sins upon himself and bearing them on the cross. In it, he authoritatively condemns sin in the flesh and redeems his people from the tyranny of the devil.

The disciples long for greatness and authority to serve themselves. Jesus uses his greatness and authority to serve and redeem his people.

Matthew 22

Matthew's Gospel is all about showing that Jesus has authority. He is the king. He brings God's kingdom, and we are his servants within it. Practically speaking, this means that he is the Lord of the church and the master of our lives. We must submit ourselves to his will and glorify him in all we do.

This chapter continues this important theme. It begins with the parable of the wedding feast, in which a king prepares a wedding feast for his son. This is a picture of the eschatological (i.e. final) coming of God at the end of the age. God will come in Christ to fully redeem his people and consummate their covenant relationship at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

But when the time comes for the feast, the invited guests do not arrive. This represents the Jewish nation. All of Old Testament revelation was an invitation and instructions as to how to prepare for this wedding feast. Preoccupied with earthly things, they go about their business and do not go to the wedding. Instead, the king invites those who are far off. This represents the Gentile nations, whom the Lord will gather into his church through the Gospel.

The parable ends with Jesus's famous statement: "...many are called, but few are chosen" (22:14). This indicates that the governing principle of salvation is God's election. A "call" goes out to many, but only a "few" are chosen. Some are appointed to life, but others are appointed to judgment, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The parable clearly indicates in its own way that Jesus is God's son and thus has His royal authority. As the passage emphasizes in conclusion, he is David's son but David's Lord. Yet the Pharisees and Sadducees (key power-groups in the Jewish nation) challenge his authority by laying verbal traps for him. Both times they fail.

First, the Pharisees lay a political trap for him over the issue of paying taxes to Caesar. If he says that these taxes should be paid, the people will turn against him (for they hate the Romans). If he says that they need not be paid, he will be open to the charge of insurrection (which will later be reprised at his crucifixion).

Jesus's famous answer destroys the false dilemma: give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Ironically, the passage is significant historically in that it reserves a sphere of life in which Ceasar is not to interfere: service to God (what we call "religion"). Human "rights" (if we

are to use the term) begin with religious rights--the freedom to worship God as his word commands. If there is no transcendent duty beyond government, all we are left with is a totalitarian state (or total anarchy). It is ironic that this passage has been used to articulate the idea that a Christian is obligated to give blind obedience to the state. Every act of submission to government must be measured by whether it interferes, lets, or hinders one's service to God.

In the second scene, the Sadducees take a crack at Jesus, leveraging the Levirate marriage laws of the Old Testament against the doctrine of the resurrection (which they reject). Jesus exposes their folly by showing that the resurrection life held out in the Scriptures cannot be measured by this life. Specifically, in the resurrection, we will neither be married nor given in marriage. We will certainly know our believing spouses, children, fathers, mothers, and extended family in heaven. But our relationships will be far deeper and more glorious than we could ever imagine.

Jesus cuts through their political-theological debate tricks and reminds them of the heart of the Jewish faith of which they claim to be heirs. The greatest commandments are to love God and your neighbor. With all their preoccupation with this world and the particulars of the law, they have neglected its weightier matters.

But Jesus comes as one who fulfills these commandments perfectly. His wisdom is perfect, and after this, no one dared question him. Neither should we! He is the king, and all his enemies will be put under his feet. Let us be among the number of his servants who worship him in love and humble adoration. The rest will be cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 23

Matthew's Gospel alternates between recording the mighty works and the mighty words of Jesus. We will read several chapters outlining his mighty deeds in healings, exorcisms, and other various miracles. Then Matthew will record several chapters with Jesus's teaching. If you have an old "red letter" Bible, this will jump out at you.

The first "teaching" section of the Gospel began with blessings. Jesus opens his famous "Sermon on the Mount" with the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Now we are in the midst of the last teaching section of the Gospel. He began his teaching with blessings in Matthew 5. He ends his teaching with curses in Matthew 23. Nine "blessings" in the Sermon on the Mount to his servants, but seven "woes" to the scribes and Pharisees.

At the heart of these woes is the charge of hypocrisy. They preach but don't practice. They lay burdens on others but won't lift a finger. They serve God only to be seen by men. They exalt themselves but will be humbled by God.

And how humbled they are in these verses! Any notion that our Savior is always on only "gentle Jesus" is blasted to smithereens in the holy fury of his condemnations. He decries them as "sons of hell," "fools," "blind men," "serpents," and a "brood of vipers."

Yet he does not take delight in their condemnations. Instead, he laments over their unbelief.

It is quite amazing that a group of people so preoccupied with meticulous religious service to God could be so blind in their hearts to him. What a sober warning this is to his church that the heart can grow so hard even under the ministry of God's church. The very things God gave them to point them to him actually served to harden their hearts and draw them away. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him.

Perhaps the most vivid image of our sinful hearts is found in verse 27. There he calls them "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

Public acts of devotion are good and necessary. But they are perilous engagements insofar as they tempt us to find comfort in being seen by men. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. If we come to him, our chief concern must be the state and

condition of our hearts before him. We must be cleansed from within by the Holy Spirit that the filth of our sin might be washed away. Only then will our external acts of worship and devotion be pleasing to him.

Matthew 24

Matthew 24 is a complex passage. No Christian doubts the truth of what Jesus predicts in these verses, although they differ significantly as to the proper interpretation.

One view sees Jesus's prophecy as being fulfilled largely (if not entirely) in the events of 70 AD, when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

Another view sees them primarily referring to what takes place at the end of the world.

Which one is it? I think a careful reading indicates elements of both. But is not as simple as putting certain verses or sections in a "70 AD" bucket, and others in an "end of the world" bucket. To do that would to disrupt the flow of what Jesus says here.

I think the proper framework for interpreting this passage is to see 70 AD as a preview and intrusion of the judgment God will bring at the end of the world. They are not two entirely separate events: the first is a foretaste of the second.

Thus Jesus looks into the future as far as the end of the world, but he does so through the "lens" of the events of 70 AD.

But the point of the passage is not simple to tickle our prophetic curiosities. Apocalyptic eschatology is eminently practical. Jesus has told us these things ahead of time so that we might always be ready and about his work. This world will pass away, but the world to come will never pass away.

Let us then be like the faithful and wise servants, busy about the Master's business and ready for his coming. The wicked servants will have no share in his kingdom, but be cast outside where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 25

Matthew 25 sets before us the final judgment and end of all things. In theology, we call this "eschatology." This is a compound word combining the Greek terms "eschatos" (meaning "last" or "final") with "logos" (meaning "word" or "thought"). Eschatology, therefore, has to do with the last, final, or ultimate things.

The whole teaching of Jesus is shaped by eschatology. That is because he himself was the coming of God in the fulness of times. He brings the kingdom of God promised long ago in the Old Testament. He brings the beginning of the--to the precipice of eternity.

Although eschatology permeates all of Jesus's teaching he also directly addresses it in passages like Matthew 24-25. There are basically two sides to his teaching. One is "objective," in which he tells us ahead of time what is going to happen. The other is "subjective," outlining our response to Christ's coming.

The emphasis in the chapter is on the latter. Our response to God's judgment focuses on two things as we look to God's coming: (1) being prepared, and (2) being faithful.

In the first part of the chapter, we read the parable of the Ten Virgins. Five are foolish and five are wise. The difference lies in how they prepared for the bridegroom's coming. Some had lamps but took no fuel, while the others did.

The problem arose in the fact that the bridegroom was delayed. This is a reference to the expectation that Christ's return would not happen immediately, and could take some time. During the delay, the foolish ones grew drowsy and slept. They were thus not prepared for the bridegroom's coming.

The next story is the Parable of the Talents. Here the issue is a little different. All the servants know the master will return. The concern is over how he will treat them and whether they need to be diligent with the task they have been given. Two of the servant are diligent in working to make something of the money they receive. Two of the servants are faithful, and enter into the joy of their master. One lives in fear, burying what was entrusted to him and bears no fruit, and is cast into the outer darkness.

The final scene declares more literally the final judgment scene pictured in the previous parables. To be sure, he still utilizes a metaphor with a description of mankind as consisting of "sheep" and "goats." But the concrete expression of how we are to prepare and be diligent comes forward in more literal detail. While they await Christ's coming, Christians are to take special care to love the needy in the church: the dispossessed, hungry, sick,

imprisoned. While there are certainly general principles here that can guide us in how we treat all mankind, the focus is on the church and those united to Christ. To care for the vulnerable is to care for Christ. The neglect them is to neglect Christ. We are in him, and all true Christian service has its eyes focused on him.

He is the bridegroom. Although tarrying for a night, he will soon come in an eternal morning. We must be ready and prepared for the marriage supper of the Lamb. He is the master of his house. He has entrusted us with eternal treasures. We must make good use of them in his church to edify, equip, and serve our brethren in the Lord.

In short, we must always be diligent and prepared for Christ's coming. The faithful and wise servants who live this way will enter into the joy of their master. Those that do not will be cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 26

Matthew 26 is filled with gut-wrenching ironies. Jesus comes to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. The Jewish leaders are blind to the fact that he is God's final Passover Lamb.

Jesus is anointed at Bethany for his burial. Christ is the treasure that alone is valuable enough to purchase eternal life. Yet his disciples complain that the money from the ointment was valuable and should have been given to the poor. To top it off Judas sells his infinitely valuable savior for a mere thirty pieces of silver. How we can complain of the waste of the first and also sell his Lord so cheaply defies rational explanation.

But irony has just begun. Jesus will be betrayed by one of his disciples. A friend will treat him as an enemy. And all this is revealed at the very Supper he institutes as a sign and seal of his death for his disciples. The betrayer dips his hand in the dish with Jesus!

Not only that, but Peter (his bold confessor) will also deny him on the cross--no less than three times. Peter denies that he will do this as emphatically as he ends up denying his Lord!

Jesus prays and asks his disciples to do the same. Jesus is filled with supplications, but his disciples are filled with sleep. He implores while the disciples snore.

Finally, at Jesus's trial, he is condemned for answering a question truthfully. The blasphemy by rejecting him as the Messiah, yet accuse him of blaspheming by acknowledging that he is the same.

But this is just the beginning. The whole story is one grand expose of irony. He saved others but doesn't save himself. He was righteous but was condemned as unrighteous. He was the Lord but treated worse than a slave. He was God but despised and rejected by men. He is the righteous judge of all but is judged by unrighteous men.

In this irony is our salvation: God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Matthew 27

There is so much in Matthew 27 it is impossible to unpack it all in a single devotional. If I were preaching to this passage, we would probably take a month or two to work through the material.

One theme that stands out through the passage is indications of the sinlessness of Jesus. Even his enemies cannot deny his innocence.

We begin with Judas, who betrayed him. The text tells us that he "changed his mind", although not in a way that indicated true repentance. He was not filled with the godly sorrow that leads to repentance, but the worldly sorrow that leads to grief. Thus he went out and hung himself. But note his confession: "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." Judas realized that Jesus was completely innocent.

Pilate also could not escape this fact. He first questions Jesus, wondering why he refuses to answer the false charges for himself. He devises a political strategy that seems unbeatable. He'll give them a choice: either release innocent Jesus accused of insurrection, or Barabbas who is guilty of insurrection. Earlier the Jews tried to beat Jesus on the horns of a dilemma when they asked whether we should pay taxes to Cesar, or multiple marriages in this life would be sorted out at the resurrection. Surely the horns of this dilemma are even sharper. Pilate thinks there is no way the Jews would embarrass and contradict themselves by accusing Jesus of insurrection worthy of death, while releasing an insurrectionist worthy of death. But that's exactly what they do despite Jesus's innocence. Finally he washes his hands and declares: "I am innocent of this man's blood."

Ironically, the soldiers underscore Jesus's innocence when they mockingly refer to him as the "king of the Jews." The very basis of the charge against him was his claim to be the Christ. For this the Jews regard him as being guilty of blasphemy. The soldiers don't really believe what they were saying, but their words ironically betray the truth: Jesus really is the king! Even the Roman centurion witnessing these things is forced to confess, "Truly this was the son of God."

There was only one truly innocent man who ever lived: Jesus. We can get quite upset when someone falsely accuses us. False accusation is a sin. The ninth commandment not only requires us to speak truthfully, but also to be restrained in thinking evil of others. But for every accusation falsely leveled against us, there are a million other true accusations that could be rightly brought against us that never come. There is no end to the depths of evil in our hearts. It's amazing how upset we can get when someone simply emphasizes or exaggerates our sins in a way we don't think is gracious. What business do we have at all getting upset that others would point out our sins? How can we be upset when someone sees a speck of dirt on the outside of a white shirt, when the inside is covered completely in mud? So it is with our sinful natures. Outside we can appear externally clean, but inside we are filled with filth.

Jesus didn't sin even once. Yet throughout his life he was accused of vile, evil things. He was fully and completely innocent in every way, but was condemned as guilty. Yet when he was

reviled, he opened not his mouth. In this he left us an example, that we might follow in his steps.

False accusation is a painful thing to undergo. But it's nowhere near the most important thing. We must not be consumed with the vindication of our name but with the vindication of the name of God. He is just and right in all that he does. His glory is supreme. When we make our all-consuming goal the clearing of our name, the name of God goes in the background. The starting point of our Christian calling is being willing to embrace suffering for sake of the name of Christ.

We must keep God's glory and righteousness central. We must not take our salvation or vindication into our own hands, but entrust ourselves to him who judges justly. Those who honor him, he will honor. We need not take that task into our own hands. such as the path of those who follow the Savior, who is crucified by man in the flesh, but vindicated by God in the Holy Spirit and resurrection.

Matthew 28

In Matthew 28 we see Jesus in his resurrection glory. The dead savior is now alive. What the disciples struggle to see by faith they now see with their waking eyes.

The evidence for the resurrection is quite compelling. Unbelievers quickly dismiss it as a fairy tale. But it was not the disciples that were concocting myths about the resurrection. Instead it was Christ's enemies who killed him. In verses 11–15, they pay off the soldiers a large sum of money. It must've been a lot of cash. The story they are to tell makes them look like incompetent fools and the disciples like supermen. No soldier would have fallen asleep under such a commission. He would have likely been executed for his negligence. The idea that multiple soldiers would have fallen asleep is laughable and ridiculous. Moreover, it took an earthquake and the power of an angel of the Lord to roll back the stone. Jesus's small band of disciples and the women that followed him would never have been able to move it. If you are looking for myths that can be quickly dismissed in the resurrection narrative, look at the tall tales of Jesus's crucifiers.

We don't have the space in a brief emotional to outline all the evidence laid forth here. You can listen to several Easter messages given in years past where I devote a great deal of attention to that very thing--probably to the point where some of you have grown weary of it!

Instead, let us note a pattern in the response of the disciples when they see the resurrected Jesus. In verse 9 and 17 the text tells us that when the disciples saw him, "they worshiped him."

what does this indicate? These are a group of Jews, after all. They know the first and second commandment: you shall have no other gods before me; you shall not worship any image of anything in the heavens above, the earth beneath, or the waters under the earth.

Yet when they fall before the "man" Jesus they bow down to worship him. Why is this? It is because this Jesus is more than a mere man. He is God. If one has the names of God, does the works of God, and receives the worship of God, then we can rightly conclude that he is God.

It is true that disciples elsewhere in the New Testament era saw Angels, at times bowing down to worship them. But every time that happens the angel corrects the would-be worshiper and directs them to God.

Yet when Jesus is worshiped he receives it from his disciples. He does not rebuke them. Instead, he declares: all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. He reinforces their worship by declaring his sovereignty.

The ultimate foundation for this authority is in the fact that the eternal Father shared this authority with his eternal Son. But historically speaking Jesus also receives that authority as the fruit of his resurrection. This means that in his resurrection his Divine power and glory are more clearly revealed than before.

With that divine authority, he gives the church a commission to be obeyed in all ages: go and make disciples of all the nations. How are we to do that? Through the ministry of word and sacrament: "...baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

in this Jesus promises to be perpetually present: "... Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." As long as we stick to the heart of the ministry Jesus has given us, he will be present with us to bless us and sustain us.

That ministry flows out of the word of God. Good preaching in churches should simply explain what the Bible says in an interesting, compelling, and meaningful way. It should focus on Christ, the Bible's central message. At the same time they should exhort Christians to live faithfully in the light of God's truth and the hope of the kingdom to come.

Anything less than this is not true Christianity. Any act of ministry that follows Christ's command will meet with his rich blessing. It will also be backed by his power, which consists of all authority in heaven and on earth. Even the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.