

Shepherding Notes

Matthew

By Caleb Bunch

Genealogy

Many have opened their Bibles in eager anticipation to start the New Testament with the book of Matthew, only to have their joy quickly deflated when they see a lengthy genealogy. Modern Americans tend to experience a near allergic reaction to long lists of names. But consider the incredible weight this held with the original audience. The book of Matthew is written to a Jewish audience. For this reason, it contains more references, quotes, and allusions to the Old Testament than any of the other gospels. This opening genealogy serves to ground the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish history. It is no coincidence that the Old Testament was preoccupied with Jesus' family tree.

As you read through this list of names, consider how each one highlights God's faithfulness: His promises to Abraham, His gift of Isaac, His protection of Jacob, and His forgiveness of Judah. See the invisible hand of God's providence as He shielded Rahab, restored Ruth, and blessed Boaz. Recognize the wisdom of God's plan as He anointed David and established a dynastic reign of kings in Israel. All the names mentioned, from David to Jeconiah, were kings over Israel (and over Judah after the kingdom was divided). Zerubbabel, the governor of Israel, was instrumental in the return from exile and the restoration of the temple, leading into the 400 years of silence that took place between the Old and New Testaments. In other words, Matthew is establishing a royal lineage for Jesus. This is not merely a genealogy. It is a defense of Jesus' claim as the one true King which had been promised to come and sit on David's throne forever.

Joseph

When you are reading any biography, it is helpful to learn about the focal person's parents. It is a general rule that nobody is more impactful in shaping a person than their own parents. Jesus is unique in this regard. He is the only person who personally shaped his parents from before they were even born. Jesus is responsible for saving and sanctifying Joseph and Mary. The Lord worked through the ages to bring about the perfect family unit into which Jesus would be born. Joseph is what is known as a "silent figure" in Scripture. Although he makes a big impact, we don't have any record of a single word spoken by him.

What we find in Joseph is a man of honor and humility. In the first century, a man's reputation was his most important asset. There is no modern parallel in America to the

shame that would be placed over an individual who had broken societal codes of honor. It was social suicide for Joseph to obey the Lord and commit himself to Mary after she had been found to be pregnant. It is a faithful man who would willingly sacrifice his reputation in order to please the Lord. It is clear that he feared the Lord, not man.

Jesus, Immanuel

Joseph was commanded to give the child the name "Jesus." The name means "Yahweh saves," or "the Lord is my salvation." It is functionally the same name as Joshua, revealing that Jesus would be the new conqueror, leading His people into the land of promise. Skeptics of the Bible often argue that Jesus never claimed to be God. As we will see, this is an absurd claim. Even in this first chapter, Matthew reveals that Jesus is to be understood as the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise that He would be "God with us." This is the great goal that God has throughout the Scriptures. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, there has been a terrible separation between God and man. It is through Christ that God has once again dwelt with us. And it is because of the work of Jesus that the story of history will end with the words we find in Rev. 21:3, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

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The Wise Men

Matthew provides us with an exclusive look at the mysterious wise men from the east. There is a great deal of unhelpful myth and legend that has grown up around them. We don't know their names, their ages, or their country of origin. What we do know is that they are called "magi." We find this word twice in the Old Testament, both times in the book of Jeremiah to refer to those who served as counselors for the kings of Persia. Contrary to what a number of modern sources say, "Magi" does not necessarily hold any connection to magic. Though Daniel and his three friends are never referred to by that name, we see them functioning in the role of magi. They were advisors to the king.

The Star

As members of a royal court, the Magi were likely well studied in all of the astrological and astronomical writings available in those days. In Matthew we are simply told that they had seen his star. How did they know that a star would arise, pointing to a newborn king? It is likely that they had read the oracles of Balaam. Although he is a relatively minor figure in our Old Testament, the historical record reveals that he was a major figure in the ancient world. Centuries after his death, his writings continued to be studied.

When Balak hired Balaam to curse the Israelites, this was part of his fourth and final oracle: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth." (Numbers 24:15–17) God promised a star would come and foreshadow the arrival of the true King. How could it come to "rest over the place where the child was?" These are the mysteries that we will not know until eternity. We can only conclude that the Lord must have been guiding them and instructing them.

Herod's Fatal Flaw

Herod the Great, the pretender king, had no royal claim. He was an Idumean, meaning an Edomite — a descendant of Esau. Jacob and Esau were still warring through the ages, but it was always the chosen Son who would get the birthright. Herod was terrified that someone would take his throne from him. His paranoia led to the murder of his own wife and three of his sons. The historian Josephus claimed that Herod would have also killed his own brother, but he "only escaped death by dying."

The arrival of Jesus was a threat to Herod's perception of authority and control. Herod was not wrong about that. His perception of Jesus' threat was too small. He would not only rule over Israel, but the whole world. He would not require something so silly as taxes or military fealty. He would require submission of every part of who we are. Sadly, most people still have a violent response to the authority of Jesus. They refuse to acknowledge that their perceived authority and autonomy is fleeting, and that they will one day bow the knee to the one true King.

Out of Egypt

Herod became the embodiment of Pharaoh, killing the baby boys. Israel had become the embodiment of Egypt. Jesus has become for us the greater Moses, leading us out of bondage to sin and death.

John the Baptist

John was a larger-than-life figure. He was societally strange, surviving on bugs and wearing camel skin while living in the wilderness. Even so, his message resonated powerfully with the public. He preached powerfully about sin and repentance, resulting in a massive cultural movement. The outward expression of repentance that John practiced was baptism by immersion in the Jordan River. Those who confessed their sin and turned to the Lord would symbolize their repentance by being submerged in the water. By preaching a message of righteousness and repentance, John was preparing the nation for Jesus' arrival.

Bear Fruit in Keeping with Repentance

When the Pharisees and Sadducees jumped on the bandwagon, following the trend of baptism, John rebuked them by saying, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" This is one of the rare occasions when we actually hear how John spoke. He fearlessly addressed their hypocrisy. By doing so, he revealed that the act of baptism means nothing if there is not first a heart of repentance. These religious rulers were not there in order to turn their hearts to the Lord. They intended to add this outward practice of baptism to their long list of good works. They viewed the outward act as fruit. God wants fruit that grows from the seed of repentance. There are many who hold this same heart today. They perform religious activities, give money, attend services, and do kind things to their neighbor with the expectation that it provides them with merit before God. John further reveals the faulty thinking of the Pharisees and Sadducees — they perceived that they had a direct line to God because of their national heritage.

The Holy Spirit and Fire

The modern Pentecostal movement often highlights the work of the Holy Spirit, often defining it in unbiblical ways. They often reference the fact that Jesus came to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, defining fire either as spiritual boldness or expressions of charismatic gifts. If you consider the actual wording of the passage, you will see that the fire John is talking about is the fire of judgment. In other words, everyone will experience the baptism that Jesus is going to bring. Either they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in salvation, or they will be baptized with fire in the judgment.

To Fulfill All Righteousness

John initially protested the idea of baptizing Jesus. He knew that there was no reason for Jesus to repent. Why should He be baptized? Jesus gives a very helpful explanation: "To fulfill all righteousness." Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life so that He could then give His righteousness to sinners like us. Theologians refer to this as "alien righteousness." It does not originate in us — it originated in the perfect life of Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of this righteousness by stating, "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." (Phil. 3:9) Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, obeying God's commands in every way that we have failed to keep them. This is known by theologians as the "active obedience" of Jesus.

My Beloved Son

The baptism of Jesus is truly one of the most incredible moments in all of human history. It marks the first occasion of God speaking from heaven since He spoke to Moses at Sinai. Moreover, it marks the only time in history that God permitted the manifest presence of all three persons of the Godhead to be experienced simultaneously by the human senses. The Father was able to be heard, and the Son and Spirit could be seen. What would God say on such a unique occasion? The person and work of Jesus — that this is truly the Son of God, and unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, God is pleased with Him.

Filmmakers and animators have long sought to produce cinematic expressions of what they perceive to be the greatest battles of good versus evil. In one corner stood the incarnate Son of God, ruler of ages, glorious in power. In the other corner stood the single greatest representation of evil in the universe: Satan, the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), the deceiver of the whole world (Revelation 12:9). Even so, the most epic face-off imaginable did not include any physical fighting. As 2 Corinthians 10:4 says, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds."

It was no accident that Jesus was tempted in the manner described in Matthew 4. Verse 1 indicates that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to encounter these temptations. Allow me to point out four aspects of these temptations. Understanding them will not only help you know and love Christ more, but it will also help you in your ongoing battle against temptation.

The Stakes of Jesus' Temptation

It is literally impossible to overstate the immensity of this event. Our salvation hung in the balance. Only a perfect man could serve as a substitute for sinful men. Satan had the audacity to demand that the God of Heaven would bow down and worship him. There is nothing that could be more upside down or perverse.

The Nature of Jesus' Temptation

In Mark 7:21, Jesus clarifies where our sin comes from. "All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." James 1:14–15 explains the process: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." You and I don't need Satan to come around to experience temptation. Your sin nature produces sinful desires. Jesus, on the other hand, did not have a sin nature. Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus had to be tempted by an external source.

The Extremity of Jesus' Temptation

Consider the extreme contrast between the setting of the first temptation and the temptation of Jesus. Adam and Eve were in a lush garden, surrounded by God's good gift of every tree. They had no need. They had no pain. Jesus, on the other hand, was at the

brink of starvation, having fasted for forty days. He was in the wilderness in one of the harshest climates on earth. Any of us would immediately fall to the temptations that were placed before Jesus.

The Form of Jesus' Temptation

Satan may be crafty, but you can learn his playbook. The pattern of temptation that Jesus experienced was precisely the pattern we see in Genesis 3. The apostle John outlines the three angles that Satan uses to attack in 1 John 2:16: "For all that is in the world — the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life — is not from the Father but is from the world." Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was "tempted in every way, yet without sin." It is for that very reason that He tells us to run to Jesus when we find ourselves in need. He is a high priest who is able to empathize with us.

The Victory of Jesus over Temptation

Satan fought with lies. Jesus fought back with truth. The father of lies twisted Scripture. Jesus corrected Him. Jesus succeeded in every way that we have failed. We have crumbled under even the most pathetically small temptations. Jesus stood firm in the face of incalculable evil. This same Jesus has promised to help us in our times of trials and temptations. Go to Him when temptations arise.

We have been granted the full armor of God in order to stand firm in the face of the evil one. But the only piece of armor described in Ephesians 6 that is offensive is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Don't ignore your armor. Look to the manner in which Jesus brandished the Word against temptation. Read it, meditate upon it, memorize it, use it in battle with temptation every day.

"Satan fought with lies. Jesus fought back with truth. Jesus succeeded in every way that we have failed — and this same Jesus has promised to help us in our times of trial."

Matthew 5–7 contains a single sermon known as the Sermon on the Mount. It is the most well-known of all the extended discourses of Jesus. This sermon could just as easily be titled "The Marks of a True Disciple." The people had an erroneous idea of what it looked like to honor God. In this sermon, Jesus smashes their perceptions and replaces their systems of religiosity with a picture of true, humble discipleship.

Beatitudes

Jesus' sermon begins with eight aphorisms that describe people who are truly blessed by God. The word for "blessed" is the word *makarios* (μακάριος) in Greek. It literally means "happy." Beatitude simply means "blessednesses" — the collection of things that would make you happy. Knowing that, you might understand why the statements of Jesus are a bit confounding. Those who mourn, those who are poor in spirit, those who are persecuted — those people are blessed/happy?

Each of these eight phrases undermines a false way of thinking about God. They can only be understood through the prism of spirituality. These are not demands; they are descriptions of the ideal disciple. Throughout this sermon, you will see that Jesus is proclaiming an upside-down kingdom. It is contrary to our natural assumptions about life. The true blessings of God come when God brings us low so that He might be exalted in and through us.

Salt and Light

Jesus famously said, "I Am the light of the world." (John 8:12) In this sermon, Jesus refers to people like you and me as the light of the world. There is, however, a glaring qualitative difference. When we shine, the purpose is "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 5:16) Like the moon, we do not produce light, we only reflect it. We can't claim the credit. Our conduct should be notably distinct from the world. However, instead of receiving accolades from the world, we are called to redirect the attention to our Father in heaven so that He might receive all the glory.

"You Have Heard It Said..."

Jesus uses this phrase, or some version of it, six times in this chapter. Each of those is followed by a reference to a passage from the Old Testament. Is Jesus undermining the Bible? Absolutely not! He is not overturning the standards. He is clarifying them. He

reveals that God is not merely concerned with our outward conformity to the law.

We naturally like to think of ourselves as decent human beings. We imagine that the standard for goodness is somewhere beneath our record. Our God is a perfect Judge with perfect information and perfect standards of holiness. He knows your thoughts better than you do. Your anger, lust, vengeance, and hatred are deserving of eternal damnation. These vignettes provide us with a necessary reality check. They shine a light into the dark corners of our hearts, revealing sins we didn't even recognize previously. They remind us that God alone is good. They remind us that we are only welcomed into His presence because Jesus has come to bring us in.

"They remind us that God alone is good – and that we are only welcomed into His presence because Jesus has come to bring us in."

You could easily spend years in a chapter like this one, soaking up all of the wisdom the Lord has provided. For today, let's simply dip our toes into each of the six actions that the Lord addresses in chapter 6.

Giving

You are a disciple, not a philanthropist. Your giving is not supposed to be a statement to the public. In fact, by making your giving public, you are voiding any other reward. Although Jesus uses giving as an example, His actual warning is against self-righteous hypocrisy. Don't be an actor, putting on a show with your displays of generosity. Love God, love others, give.

Praying

Here we find the most famous prayer in the Bible. Notice that Jesus is not commanding that we pray these exact words. He tells us to pray like this. This prayer is a helpful outline — a framework around which we can structure prayers for whatever needs we have. Our prayers should begin by recognizing who God is, and who He is toward us. We put ourselves into the proper position as His adopted children, honoring His name. Before ever asking for our needs, we first pray that whatever is best for the kingdom of God will take precedence and that whatever God desires will prevail.

We are told to ask for three categories of things. First, "Give us this day our daily bread" — all our physical needs. "And forgive us our debts" — we must ask for forgiveness for our past failures. "And lead us not into temptation" — we look forward to the future, asking God to help us honor Him as we seek to walk with Him.

Fasting

Just like the earlier message about giving, the scalpel of Jesus is seeking to cut away the practice of religious performance. Motives matter. Putting on makeup so that you look like you are starving is a truly bizarre act — done to appear holy. But have you found another outlet for this sinful motive of the heart?

Treasuring

Whether you watch small children play with stuffed animals or dig up bone jewelry out of ancient burial mounds, you will notice that people instinctively find things to treasure.

What do you treasure? Jesus puts His finger right on the pressure point of money. He refers to it as a master that competes with God Himself. You can't serve them both.

Jesus highlights the frail and ephemeral nature of earthly treasure. You could work your entire life to fill a vault of gold, but you are likely to outlive your treasure. It can be taken from you without warning. But, if your treasure is in heaven, it lasts forever and cannot be disturbed or destroyed. If Jesus is your treasure, you will never be disappointed.

Resting

Worry is evidence that you are failing to trust the Lord. He may not grant you every earthly gift that you want. He is not promising to make you healthy and wealthy. He is, however, promising that He will give you what you need. Your job is not to simply chase these necessities. Your calling is to seek God's kingdom first.

"If Jesus is your treasure, you will never be disappointed. He is an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."

Judging

The word "hypocrite" in Greek literally means actor. It is someone who puts on a mask in order to play a character on stage. Jesus is not decrying our need to instruct, correct, or rebuke those who are caught in sin. He is condemning hypocritical judgment. If you are pretending to be righteous, don't imagine that it is your place to perform eye surgery on your neighbor. The Pharisaical, self-righteous heart stands in judgment over others because they consider themselves to be the standard. Humble self-examination always precedes biblical admonition.

Asking

Are you quicker to complain or to pray? A complaining heart indicates that you believe God has either forgotten you, or that He does not really care for your needs. Jesus is not denying that you have needs. Rather, He is imploring us to consider the heart of the Father. Make it your practice to actively ask, steadily seek, and know that your knocking results in an open door.

Doing

As it regards other people, Jesus simplifies everything by summing up the entire Old Testament with the "Golden Rule." Laws have limitations. People often desire to know exactly how much they have to do before they are allowed to stop putting in the effort. Love has no limits. Treating others as you would like to be treated goes beyond the legal parameters of how much, how many, how often.

Bearing

You are never going to reach sinless perfection in this life. However, true Christians will display their newfound life by bearing spiritual fruit. You will change. If there is no evidence of spiritual growth, there is evidence of spiritual death.

Relying

Do you think you are going to heaven? On what are you banking your eternity? Jesus reveals that there are "many" who will encounter a nightmare scenario at the judgment. They will stand before God and make a case for themselves, genuinely believing that they

have made themselves worthy of entry by their actions. Even so, the Just Judge of the universe does not view them as meritorious acts. On what are you relying? Nothing you do will earn you a ticket into heaven. The blood of Jesus alone can save you.

Building

You are building your life on something. Jesus identifies the only two options: the rock, or the shifting sands of anything else. Sure disaster follows a life built on sand. What is the rock? The words of Christ. Hear His gospel message, believe it, and let it inform everything you do.

"Nothing you do will earn you a ticket into heaven. The blood of Jesus alone can save you. His blood covers all of your lawlessness."

The book of Matthew is divided into 12 sections. It alternates between seven sections of narratives and five discourses (or sermons). We began with the narratives of the early life and ministry of Jesus. Yesterday we concluded the first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. Today we begin making our way through the second narrative portion. Matthew's primary focus in chapters 8–9 is on the miracles of Jesus — ten miracles, five in each chapter.

The important thing to remember is that the miracle was never the main point. When Jesus did something miraculous, it was always done to highlight who He is and what He came to accomplish.

- Cleansing the Leper: Jesus is not made unclean. As God, He makes others clean.
- Healing the Servant: Jesus's power is not limited by distance. As God, His authority is universal.
- Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law and many others: Jesus fulfills messianic prophecies about healing. As God, He was not limited to only a special field of healing.
- Jesus Calms the Storm: Jesus has power over creation. As God, Jesus spoke all things into existence. They have no choice but to listen and obey His voice.
- Jesus Casts out Demons: Men fear the supernatural. But the powerful, mysterious enemies that we have no hope to defeat prove to be no match for Jesus. As God, even the demons must obey His commands.

This collection of stories is likely familiar to you. Don't let that familiarity cloud your awe. There are times in your life that you realize that you are truly small and helpless. Jesus has none of your limitations. His power is infinite. His range is boundless. His authority is unquestionable. His enemies are powerless against Him. And this all-powerful, omnipotent God loves you. He is for you, not against you. He came to help you, serve you, save you.

"Jesus has none of your limitations. His power is infinite, His range boundless, His authority unquestionable – and this all-powerful God loves you."

Your Sins Are Forgiven

All of the miracles of Jesus are designed to reveal His divinity and authority. The first narrative of this chapter contains an excellent example of how Jesus used the ability to heal as a teaching tool. The men who brought their friend to Jesus worked hard to get him into the room. Other gospel accounts tell us that they even tore a hole in the roof to lower this man down right in front of the Savior. Why did they do it? Of course, they wanted this man to be healed. It was not their plan or expectation that Jesus would forgive him. Comparatively, forgiveness is the greatest gift. Physical healing would last, at most, the rest of this man's earthly life; forgiveness altered his eternal destiny.

Blasphemy

The scribes were not wrong to make a big deal about Jesus' declaration of forgiveness. They correctly understood that only God can forgive sin. Imagine that a couple came to me for marriage counseling. In this imaginary scenario, the husband is innocent of any wrongdoing and burns with righteous indignation. Now imagine that my big plan to "fix" their marriage is for me, the counselor, to look the wife in the eyes and say "I forgive you." Would that fix the problem? Obviously not. The husband must be the one to forgive. The scribes rightly understood that Jesus was claiming to forgive the spiritual penalty for this man's sin. This is a claim to be God. They were right to see this as Jesus' self-declaration of divinity.

Which Is Easier to Say?

The Lord presents the scribes with an interesting question. He places two things side by side: healing and the forgiveness of sin. Notice that Jesus does not ask which is easier to do. He asks which of those two things is easier to say. Both of them are impossible to do, but one of them is easy to say. There is no earthly, physical, verifiable evidence that God has forgiven someone. On the other hand, if someone says "You are healed," there is an immediate way to determine the veracity of that claim. That is why Jesus says, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." The healing that followed revealed the true identity of Jesus.

Pray to the Lord of the Harvest

The closing portion of this chapter contains a command from Jesus to His disciples to pray for the harvest of people who God is calling into His kingdom. In his Expository Thoughts on Matthew, J.C. Ryle says:

"If we know anything of prayer, let us make it a point of conscience never to forget this solemn charge of our Lord's. Let us settle it in our minds, that it is one of the surest ways of doing good, and stemming evil. Personal working for souls is good. Giving money is good. But praying is best of all. By prayer we reach Him without whom work and money are alike in vain. We obtain the aid of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit alone can make ministers of the Gospel, and raise up lay workmen in the spiritual harvest, who need not be ashamed. Never, never may we forget that if we would do good to the world, our first duty is to pray!"

The second of Jesus' five sermons in Matthew is known as the "Charge to the Twelve." It is helpful to recognize that some of these commands are general principles for the Christian life, but much of what is said in this chapter is designed to be particular marching orders for the 12 apostles as they preached at that specific time in the ministry of Jesus. For example, Jesus tells them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (vs. 5–6) There are, however, principles that Jesus is putting in place that transcend this unique time in redemptive history.

Have No Fear

All who follow Christ are given the gracious command to have no fear of those who would persecute us. Their only "power" resides in the physical dimension. They can only attack, damage, or kill your earthly body. Jesus tells us to have a deeper fear of the God of the universe who holds both your body and your eternal soul in His hands. This would be a terrifying reality if it were not for two precious promises. First, God knows you intimately — to such an extent that He has numbered every hair on your head. Secondly, He cares for you infinitely. He values you. You are more precious to Him than the birds of the air. He delights in you. Do not deny Him before men.

Not Peace, But a Sword

Do you remember the most well-known incident that Jesus had with a sword? Peter drew out a short sword and cut off the ear of Malchus in order to protect Jesus. How did Jesus respond? "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matthew 26:52) It seems clear that the mission of Jesus was non-violent. So then, what does Jesus intend for us to understand by His statement that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword? It is to say that His arrival was going to bring about immense division — not because His followers would violently oppose the world; but that the world would violently oppose His followers.

As my good friend Ed Moore often says, "When you become a Christian, you don't usually have to leave your friends. They will leave you." This becomes particularly painful when it occurs inside of a family. Jesus is revealing to the twelve, and by extension all of us, that following Him comes at a high cost. But it is always worth it. "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39)

"When you become a Christian, you don't usually have to leave your friends. They will leave you." – Following Him comes at a high cost. But it is always worth it.

John's Doubt

Jesus refers to John the Baptist as the "Elijah who is to come." This is a reference to the very last chapter of the Old Testament in which Malachi promised, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:5-6) John was the very last of the Old Covenant prophets. Jesus calls John the greatest man born of woman. Yet, even John experienced doubt. When John the Baptist was imprisoned, suffering persecution, waiting for the consolation of Israel, he began to wonder if he had gotten something wrong. He sent messengers to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus sent the messengers back with a reminder that He was indeed doing the work that the Messiah was supposed to do. Sometimes we experience doubt in the Lord because we don't see Him working on our timetable. When those expectations are not met, we begin to doubt the entirety of God's purpose, plan, or existence. Notice how gracious the Lord is towards this battle with doubt. He gently reminds John of the truth. The Lord does the same for you when you doubt. Trust Him.

"We Played the Flute"

Jesus poetically rebukes the people of Israel who first rejected John, and then rejected Jesus. They ridiculed John because he refused to eat "normal" food or drink wine, calling him demon possessed. So, you might think that they would accept a prophet who came in the opposite manner. When Jesus arrived, both eating their food and drinking wine, they called him a glutton and a drunkard. The point is well taken. It did not matter what they did — some people would still reject them. This was a brilliant way for Jesus to unmask that these accusations were nothing more than an excuse by people who were determined to refuse the gospel at all costs.

Gentle and Lowly

Jesus describes Himself as a very different kind of ruler than Caesar. He was not clambering to force others to serve Him. Kings command others to carry heavy burdens. Jesus, on the other hand, says that His rule is easy and light. 1 John 5:3 says, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." In his book *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund writes:

"You don't need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. No payment is required; he says, 'I will give you rest.' His rest is gift, not transaction."

"You don't need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come." – Dane Ortlund, Gentle and Lowly

The Lord of the Sabbath

Matthew 12 opens with a showdown that would confront the very heart of legalism that permeated Pharisee culture. The Pharisees inaccurately claimed that it was sinful for the disciples to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath. Instead of calling out their clear failure to understand the Old Testament commands, Jesus gave a history lesson. He described an occasion when King David ate the Bread of the Presence, and paralleled that with the way the priests are not considered to be in sin when they work on the Sabbath. He is declaring that He has an office of authority which is required to be always fulfilled — every day, even the Sabbath. He is Lord — absolute master — of the Sabbath. He rules over it.

By healing a man's hand on the Sabbath, Jesus was doing good. Instead of rejoicing and glorifying God, the Pharisees conspired to "destroy Him." Here are the steps of how legalism typically works.

- Step 1: A God of Self. Legalism begins with a corrupted view of God. It centers around the idea that we believe we can force God to love/accept/receive us if we just do the right things. Legalism says, "I earn merit, therefore God owes me." This perverts reality and places us above God. Legalism makes us self-worshippers.
- Step 2: A Self-Selected Law. When we realize we can't fully keep God's rules, we make lists of God's rules that we think are actually important. Jesus points out this problem in the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 by saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." Legalists pick only the biblical commands that they like.
- Step 3: A Self-Expanded Law. Somewhere along the line the Pharisees decided that the Sabbath required people not to pick heads of grain. They put words in God's mouth. Legalists not only reject some of God's clear commands, they also build their own systems of religion that God does not sanction.

- Step 4: A Self-Imposed Law. When you create your own law built around your proclivities, you will naturally see yourself as more holy than people who don't share your standards. The legalist must impose his standards of righteousness on others. Grace brings joy. Legalism brings misery.
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The Unforgivable Sin

I have occasionally spoken to believers who have become convinced that they have committed the unpardonable sin. It is important to recognize that the people that Jesus is decrying are not looking for forgiveness. They are not interested in the grace of God. They fully reject the message of Jesus and were specifically attributing God's works to the devil. Two very important takeaways: First, never refuse to share the gospel with someone because you are convinced that their sin is unforgivable. God forgives people that you would imagine to be beyond the possibility of redemption. Secondly, never assume that you are unable to be forgiven. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

"Grace brings joy. Legalism brings misery."

The Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 13 contains the third of five sermons in this gospel, known as the "Parable Discourse." Perhaps the most notable refrain is the term "the kingdom of heaven." This phrase is used thirty-one times in Matthew and a grand total of zero times in the rest of the Bible. The closest we find in the Old Testament is Daniel 2:44, "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed... It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever." Matthew's Jewish audience would have readily recognized that Jesus was claiming to be the inaugurator of this new kingdom.

The Purpose of Parables

A common misconception is that the parables were used by Jesus as a way to communicate complex theological truths to a largely illiterate audience — complexity made clear. These explanations are near perfect opposites of Jesus' own explanation as to why He utilized parables. When God commissioned Isaiah to go preach to the people of Israel, the Lord foretold that they would not listen to him. Jesus reached back into the Old Testament and quoted that very declaration to reveal that this kind of preaching would make eyes blind and ears dull. The good news is seen in the recurring chorus of this chapter: "He who has ears, let him hear." If you have understood the gospel, it is because God has granted you the inexplicable blessing of having ears to hear the good news.

True Treasure

The two shortest parables in the gospels are found in verses 44–46. The main point of both is identical: give up lesser things for the greatest thing. Jesus is true treasure. It is worth it to lose everything and everyone else if you can simply have Him. We often sing, "All I have is Christ." If you replace the word "Christ" with anything else, then that is a negative sentence — a complaint of lack. When we sing "all I have is Christ," we are declaring that we have the Pearl of Great Price in our possession. We have found the greatest treasure imaginable.

"Jesus is true treasure. It is worth it to lose everything and everyone else if you can simply have Him."

Feeding 5,000

The feeding of the 5,000 is perhaps the most underappreciated of the miracles of Jesus. It is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. It would have created a seismic response from people throughout the entire nation. Matthew tells us that the 5,000 person tally does not include the women and children. Considering that there were probably many families present, the number of those in attendance is probably closer to 20,000. One commentator argues that everyone in the entire nation probably knew somebody who personally experienced this miracle.

It is possible that many who gathered in that desolate place were skeptics. Perhaps some were just interested in seeing if Jesus could put on a good show. What they discovered in that barren land was that they had underestimated the man they had come to see. J.C. Ryle puts it like this:

"Here was a creative power, beyond all question. Something real, solid, and substantial must plainly have been called into being, which did not exist before. There is no room left for the theory that the people were under the influence of an optical illusion, or a heated imagination. Five thousand hungry people would have never been satisfied if they had not received in their mouths material bread. In short, it is plain that the hand of him who made the world out of nothing was present on this occasion."

One can clearly see from this miracle that Jesus is the living embodiment of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" — Jesus had compassion on the crowds when He saw their hunger. "He makes me lie down in green pastures" — Jesus instructed the disciples to organize the people and have them seated in groups on the hillside, just like a shepherd would do with his sheep. "He restores my soul" — when the disciples returned from their mission trip, Jesus saw that they were tired and gave them the opportunity to rest. Matthew's telling of this miracle is his way of telling you that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

"Jesus is the living embodiment of Psalm 23. Whatever He commands must be carried out. Geography is not a barrier for Jesus."

Today we will zoom in on the portion of this chapter that is likely most misunderstood: Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman. This story takes place in the region of Tyre and Sidon. The Jewish historian Josephus said that these people were "notoriously our bitterest enemies."

A woman began crying out for Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Consider the words of commentator James Edwards: "Of all the people who approach Jesus, this individual has the most against her from a Jewish perspective. It reads like a crescendo of demerit; she is a woman, a Greek Gentile, from the infamous pagans of Syrian Phoenicia."

Jesus' initial response to her was silence. Don't mistake that for indifference. As with all of His miracles, Jesus had a perfect plan. When Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," the disciples expected their Messiah to focus on national Israel. If that was the mission, this woman was the enemy.

The woman persistently pressed on. The Greek word for her posture is προσκυνησασα — "she was worshipping." Looking at Jesus and worshipping Him as God, she simply asked, "Lord, help me." That is the desperate cry of a person who recognizes that there is no other place to go.

Many modern readers struggle to see Jesus' response as loving: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." However, when Jesus says this, He does not use the traditional word. He uses a diminutive form much more similar to our English word "puppy" — removing the venom and racist hatred that usually accompanied it. Jesus did not say this to offend. He does so in order to put her faith on display.

This woman believes that Jesus is not only powerful, but He is Good. Her faith shines through as she says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." True faith is humble. It does not make demands of the Lord. Rather, true faith recognizes that God's goodness and mercy are abundantly given to those who fully trust in Him.

"True faith is humble. It does not make demands of the Lord. Rather, true faith recognizes that God's goodness and mercy are abundantly given to those who fully trust in Him."

Who Do You Say That I Am?

As Jesus and His disciples were traveling, Jesus asked about the common consensus about His identity. "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." If any of those were true, it would have made Jesus the most important person in human history. However, none of them compare to the reality of Jesus' true identity.

When Jesus pressed the disciples for their own opinion, Simon answered with the clearest confession of Jesus' divinity in the book of Matthew. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Christ means Messiah or Anointed One. By calling Jesus the "Son of the living God," Simon was highlighting the eternal divinity of Jesus. Jesus made it clear that Simon did not come up with this idea on his own. God the Father revealed it to him. All who ever come to this same realization do so by the gracious revelation of God. He opens our eyes.

On This Rock

Jesus took this opportunity to change Simon's name. He began to call him "Peter," which means "rock." The Roman Catholic Church claims that Peter is the rock upon which Jesus promised to build the church. That is a very poor reading of the text. When Jesus says, "on this rock I will build my church," the word for Peter is a small rock, but the word that Jesus uses for Himself is the word for bedrock. The church is built on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ alone.

Take Up Your Cross

What are the requirements of being a Christian? According to Jesus, you must pick up your cross and follow Him. This statement would have scandalized the original audience. Crosses were reserved as capital punishment for the most dangerous and depraved criminals. A cross was a sign of overt shame. People being executed by crucifixion were forced to carry their own crosses as a form of humiliation. Why would Jesus make this the standard practice for those who want to be His disciple?

You must figuratively lose your life — die daily to your own desires. Your life is not your own. Paul fleshes out this idea for us in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." The great promise is that "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." There is nothing fatalistic or vain about picking up your cross. You are following Jesus who carried a cross for us, entered the grave, and came out victorious over death.

"There is nothing fatalistic or vain about picking up your cross. You are following Jesus who carried a cross for us, entered the grave, and came out victorious over death."

Today our focus will be on the incredible event that we call the transfiguration of Jesus. If you put Jesus into a lineup with four other Jewish men from His day, none of us could confidently pick Him out. He looked like us. But He was always different from us. Jesus is the Holy, Spotless, Lamb of God. What does it mean that Jesus was transfigured? It means that the disciples are getting an opportunity to see Jesus for who He really is.

Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain. I love the way this text doesn't make a big deal about this. So why are they here?

- These men do not appear because Jesus needs their help. He does not need council or input from anyone.
- This is not primarily for Moses and Elijah. We learn from the book of Luke that the content of their conversation was about "his departure" — His death on the cross. These heroes of the faith must have been so excited to discuss with their Savior and King the plan of redemption that will soon be fulfilled.
- Verse 3 says that these two Old Testament saints appeared to them — meaning to Peter, James, and John. I believe that this event took place so that the inner circle of Jesus' disciples would understand the supremacy of Jesus that far outreaches even the greatest of men.

Moses and Elijah both encountered God on Mount Sinai, albeit several hundred years apart. Neither of them were allowed to see the face of God, but now, with unveiled faces, these three disciples join with Moses and Elijah in gazing upon the open and uninhibited glory of God in the glowing face of Jesus Christ.

Peter, in awe of this event, desired to build three tents — literally tabernacles — one for each of these glorious figures. God the Father quickly clarified from heaven that Jesus alone is the Beloved Son. "Listen to Him." From this point in the book of Matthew, Jesus is going to move in the direction of Jerusalem and never turn to the side. Even though many more events take place, they all occur as Jesus is marching toward His death on the cross.

"Moses and Elijah encountered God on a mountain but were not allowed to see His face. Now, with unveiled faces, three disciples gaze upon the glory of God in the glowing face of Jesus Christ."

If Your Eye Causes You to Sin

Jesus instructs His disciples to radically amputate the avenues that bring sin into our lives. To be clear, Jesus does not mean that you should literally cut off your appendages. He does, however, instruct us to take seemingly drastic action to remove the constant flow of temptation into our lives. Over the course of my ministry, I have seen no place where this message is more needed than the arena of pornography. Many men and women who experience destructive temptation will continually return to the very same places repeatedly. Do you need to radically remove access one way or another? To paraphrase Jesus, it is better to be technologically crippled and walk in the light than to enter hell with your smartphone or TV. If there is any sin of any kind that you find to be a pattern of failure, cut off the source of temptation to the best of your ability.

Church Discipline

Most modern, American churches do not practice church discipline. Jesus only uses the word "church" twice in the gospels. Both times it is in relation to the authority of the church. Here in chapter 18, He informs us about the process of removing an unrepentant sinner from the church. This process is not a top-down authoritarianism from a local pastor. It is necessarily personal, and initially private between two parties. Almost all church discipline is informal — it happens in honest conversation where one Christian lovingly but truthfully seeks to point out sin in a brother or sister in Christ. Most of the time, the simple act of loving rebuke results in humble confession and repentance.

Sadly, escalation becomes necessary if the person in sin refuses to repent. Jesus commands that we bring another person along — one that is mature in Christ, knowledgeable in the Word, and filled with wisdom. The goal is not to gang up on someone; it is to display a solidarity with God's Word and a seriousness about sin. All of this is to be done with the goal of restoring the fallen brother or sister. If someone ultimately refuses to repent, it reveals that they did not truly know the Lord in a saving way. (1 Cor. 5, 1 John 2:19)

Forgiveness

The parable of the unforgiving servant is truly one of the most brilliant stories ever told. Everyone who hears it understands that the servant who had been forgiven a great debt

was very evil for demanding payment over a small sum. What Christians must understand is that they are a servant that has been forgiven an incalculable penalty. When you understand the extent to which you have been forgiven, it will give you the ability to freely forgive others.

"When you understand the extent to which you have been forgiven, it will give you the ability to freely forgive others."

As a parent, I love to see the way Jesus welcomed children to Himself. The disciples took it upon themselves to be bouncers, protecting Jesus' precious time from these children who had no ability to bring anything to the table. They couldn't fund Jesus' ministry. They couldn't provide housing hospitality. The disciples viewed these children as having nothing to give. That is precisely what Jesus highlights about them.

Jesus claimed that the only people who would enter His kingdom were those who came like these children. "To such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Jesus was not highlighting their innocence. We know this for at least two reasons. First, children are not innocent. As both a former child and a father of seven, I can say this with a great deal of personal experience. Psalm 58:3 says, "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies."

The second problem with this thinking is this: if only the innocent will enter the kingdom of heaven, nobody reading these words would ever get in. Innocence, once lost, is not regained. Jesus does not require that those who come to Him be perfectly innocent. Rather, He commands that we come like these children: fully dependent. These little ones came to Jesus, hands raised, simply desiring to be near Him. They weren't trying to make a bargain. They weren't trying to earn His favor. Simply put, they had nothing to offer. That is exactly what Jesus demands of us.

"Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to the cross I cling; / Naked, come to Thee for dress; / Helpless look to Thee for grace; / Foul, I to the fountain fly; / Wash me, Savior, or I die." — Rock of Ages

In contrast, we see a rich young ruler who came to Jesus wanting to join His team. We learn that this young man was a fine, upstanding law keeper. Jesus said, "There is only one who is good." This man's response ("All these I have kept. What do I still lack?") indicates that he has overestimated his own righteousness. Jesus put His thumb right into the pressure point of this man's materialism: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." This is followed by what some call the saddest verse in the Bible: "When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

The criteria for discipleship is to bring nothing. The cost of discipleship is to give up everything. This does not mean that you will never experience any earthly blessings. It simply means that Jesus must come first.

"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." If left to ourselves, none of us would ever come to saving faith. But God is good and kind.

"The criteria for discipleship is to bring nothing. The cost of discipleship is to give up everything."

"The Parable of the Vineyard Workers" is found exclusively in the book of Matthew. Notice how the story is bookended. The last verse in chapter 19 says, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." The parable concludes in 20:16: "So the last will be first, and the first last." Matthew is employing a writing tool known as an *inclusio* — the saying that opens and closes the parable are like slices of bread, and the story within is like the meat.

What does it mean that the last shall be first and the first last? John MacArthur explains it well:

"In a foot race, the only way for the last to be first and the first to be last is for everyone to finish simultaneously. If everyone crosses the finish line at exactly the same instant, the first are last and the last are first. Everyone ends in a dead heat. That, of course, is precisely the point Jesus was making in the parable. Those hired first and those hired last all got exactly the same pay. All of them, from the first to the last, got the full benefit of the landowner's generosity, in equal shares."

We have to be careful not to read the wrong message into this parable. Jesus is certainly not claiming that anyone has earned salvation. Rather, the point is that God is able to show kindness and grace to anyone in any way that He sees fit. This is easily applied in three ways.

First, those who come to saving faith at the end of their lives are no less able to experience eternal life than those who follow Christ from a young age. The thief on the cross only trusted in Jesus for a few hours before his death. Even so, Jesus promised him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Secondly, this parable may have direct overtones of the coming expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles. In this parable, it is likely that the workers who were there early represent the Jewish people who had followed the Lord for centuries. Those who came into the fields later represent the Gentiles. Everyone crosses the finish line together. Because our salvation is all of grace, God can give whatever reward He desires. The reward is of such great value that nobody could ever earn it in a billion lifetimes. It is not earned by anyone. It is given freely.

"The reward is of such great value that nobody could ever earn it in a billion lifetimes. It is not earned by anyone. It is given freely."

A Kingly Entrance

Jesus arrived at the gates of Jerusalem as the most famous person in the nation. He had spent the last three years performing miracles that had blessed hundreds of people in dozens of communities. We know from John's gospel that He had raised Lazarus from the dead just days before making this grand entrance. The crowds were ecstatic with His arrival. They were treating Him just like they would a king. The symbolism of riding a donkey was both a prophetic fulfillment and an intentional parallel to David, the greatest king of Israel's past. The people were looking to Jesus as the promised Messianic King, which is why they cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

A Priestly Cleansing

It appears that upon entering Jerusalem, Jesus made a beeline straight for the temple. He immediately carried out a mission to purify the temple. The priests were entrusted with the role of ensuring that all parts of the temple were utilized for worship. However, the court of the Gentiles — the only part where they were permitted to enter — had been turned into an open-air market. According to historians, the religious rulers had cornered the market on animal sales. Jesus took on the role of a righteous priest, eliminating the distractions from the true purpose of the outer courts.

A Prophetic Curse

The following morning, Jesus cursed a fig tree. Many critics of Jesus have used this event to paint Jesus as an angry, bitter, quick-tempered man. Just like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus was using physical material to make a spiritual point. The Old Testament contains multiple prophecies about the nation of Israel failing to bear good fruit. Earlier in Jesus' ministry, He had taught a parable about a barren fig tree that concluded, "Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." (Luke 13:9) The key to the curse of the fig tree is to see that the time of Israel's disobedience was coming to a conclusion.

The Parable of the Tenants

In this parable, Jesus describes the religious leaders of Israel as dishonorable tenants. Just like their forefathers, they killed the prophets that God sent to warn them. Finally, they killed the Son. By stating this, Jesus perfectly foreshadowed the grievous sin that these religious leaders were already scheming to commit. Notice how Matthew intentionally connects this to the fig tree. Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits." (vs. 43)

"He is prophet, priest, and king who serves His people perfectly. The three-fold office of Christ is on glorious display in Jerusalem."

Apologetics is the art of defending our faith. It is an important tool in the Christian toolbox. Unfortunately, for many Christians, it is never sharpened; rather, it is left to rust and is, therefore, worthless when needed. As we have seen throughout the book of Matthew, the Pharisees were men who believed in the Scriptures but went beyond them and created their own legalistic system. Conversely, the Sadducees rejected much of the Old Testament, only adhering to the first five books of the Bible. They denied anything supernatural. When the Sadducees approach Jesus, they know that He believes in life after death. So they offer him a hypothetical dilemma to prove that life after death is untenable.

There was a woman who got married. Then, her husband died. According to the law of Moses, the deceased man's brother was required to marry her in order to produce an heir. Now, all of these husbands are in heaven — who is her husband then? The Sadducees had likely used this argument against the Pharisees and found that they could not give a good answer. Consider the words of J.C. Ryle: "Let us remember that an unbeliever will always try to press us with the difficulties of religion, and especially with those which are connected with the world to come. We must avoid this mode of argument as far as possible. It is leaving the open field to fight in a jungle."

Jesus responded, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." He quickly corrected their misunderstanding about what we will be like in eternity: "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

Then Jesus took them right to Exodus 3 — a portion of the Bible that they accepted as legitimate — and quoted God's exact words. "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When the Sadducees approached Jesus, they did so with a supremely unlikely hypothetical edge case. When Jesus responded, He went to the chapter in the Old Testament that was more studied by the Israelites of His day than any other. The Lord did not say, "I was their God." All of those men had been dead for more than 400 years, yet God still says "I Am their God." They were supposedly experts in this material — yet Jesus lovingly revealed that they had missed something.

"Knowing apologetics is good, and understanding evangelistic tactics is helpful. But the most important thing is to truly know God as He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures."

Matthew 23 is known as the chapter of seven woes. Some of the most fiery language that Jesus ever employed is used right here against the religious leaders of Israel. The Lord systematically dismantles their façade of righteousness and publicly reveals their hypocritical wickedness.

The "Good"

The Pharisees were truly committed to outward acts of religiosity. They did their best to follow the external codes of the law. Jesus acknowledges in this sermon that they do many good deeds (though they are only done to be seen by others). He also highlights that they were missional, willing to "travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte." They were faithful to tithe, even down to their spices of mint, dill, and cumin. They looked good on the outside, cleaning the exterior of the cup and the plate.

The "Bad"

All of the "good" things that Jesus pointed out are completely nullified by the fact that they were nothing more than performative self-glorification. Jesus lays bare their true desire: "to be seen by others." Cleaning the outside of the cup and bowl is of no value if the inside is still filthy. Jesus compares it to being a whitewashed tomb — pretty on the outside, full of death on the inside. Making proselytes was of no value because "you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

Six times in this chapter, Jesus refers to these people as hypocrites. Hypocrite is literally the word for "actor" — someone who wears a mask and pretends to be something or someone they are not. The Pharisees were professional pretenders. They had no true love for God; they simply loved their own reputation.

The Ugly

You don't have to be a Pharisee to have these problems. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (vs. 12) Examine yourself today. Do you truly have a love for the Lord, or are you just following a list of rules? Are you transparent about your sin, or do you pretend to be holier than you really are? Do you wear a mask when you go to church, pretending that you are victorious over sin? Do you pay attention to the rules that you like to follow, but neglect the "weightier matters of the law?"

At the heart of this kind of hypocrisy is a hideous pride. There is only one person whose opinion of you ultimately matters — God Himself. You can't fool Him. He sees through the mask.

"At the heart of this kind of hypocrisy is a hideous pride. There is only one person whose opinion of you ultimately matters — God Himself. You can't fool Him. He sees through the mask."

Matthew 24 and 25 are the most challenging and controversial chapters in the entire book. They deal with matters of judgment for the people of Israel as well as the final judgment. Our goal today will be to consider three truths that we find clearly in chapter 24.

"See That No One Leads You Astray."

Jesus warned that there would be false witnesses claiming to be the Messiah. To this very day, cults are built around people claiming to be the Messiah. Islam, for example, is a religion based upon the sayings of someone who claimed to be the true and great prophet of God. Millions of people have been led astray since the time of Jesus by charismatic leaders who claim to be sent by God. We have no need to search for another gospel. We have the truth in the Word of God. We have no need of another messianic figure. We have the true Christ, Jesus, the Son of God.

"No One Knows..."

In verses 36–37, Jesus plainly states, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." This has not stopped a cavalcade of dunces from developing complex formulas to determine the date of Jesus' return. Perhaps most well known in recent days is Harold Camping. He claimed that Jesus would return on September 6, 1994. When he was obviously wrong, he tweaked his formula and determined that the actual return would be May 21, 2011. His false claims brought ridicule upon the name of Jesus.

Camping is certainly not alone. The entire religion of the Seventh Day Adventists was born out of this very same error. One of the cornerstone doctrines that William Miller taught was that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. When the day passed without Christ's return, the Seventh Day Adventists shifted their doctrine and began to call that day "The Great Disappointment." Don't buy into the hype when the next prediction is made. There is nobody that will ever reveal the mystery to you. As Deuteronomy 29:29 explains, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever."

"You Must Also Be Ready..."

The most practical principle to apply from this chapter is the reality that we are to always be ready. We should not be like the wicked servant in the parable at the conclusion of the chapter. Just because we do not see Jesus does not mean that He is absent. We are always under the gracious supervision of our Savior. Moreover, those who are followers of Christ should live as though His return is possible at any moment, so that we might have no cause to be ashamed. Live for Him at all times. When He returns, you will be found to be a faithful servant.

"Live for Him at all times. When He returns, you will be found to be a faithful servant."

In yesterday's text, we learned that it is vital for Christians to always be ready for the return of Jesus. Matthew 25 continues pulling on that thematic thread with three separate, but overlapping teachings about the coming judgment.

The Ten Virgins

This chapter opens with a parable that underscores that true believers will persevere to the end. The foolish virgins who did not take care to bring flasks of oil are representative of those who have an appearance of godliness, but deny its power. (2 Timothy 3:5) Many scholars believe that the oil is representative of the Holy Spirit. Those who truly have the Spirit will be welcomed in, but those who do not will not. At its most basic, this parable highlights the exclusivity of heaven. However, it is also clear that the judgment of the foolish virgins is due to their own refusal to respond appropriately to their invitation to meet the bridegroom. The parable of the ten virgins reveals that true believers will live a life of persevering faith.

The Talents

This parable is often used to highlight the Christian doctrine of stewardship. Although the word "talent" can metaphorically be used to describe our skills or abilities, that is not the original meaning of the word. A "talent" was a measure of weight — roughly 75 pounds of gold or silver. The man who received the smallest amount was given the equivalent of 15 years of the average salary in one lump sum. By saying that these people were given such a large amount, Jesus is revealing that the gifts are large, so the expectation is high.

However, it is helpful to recognize that the setting of this story is against a backdrop of a master who has gone away and will one day return. The readiness of the believer continues to be the main theme. The point is not that God demands that we use our skills to earn His favor. Rather, it is that we have a responsibility to respond with care to the gospel.

The Sheep and the Goats

True believers serve their brothers and sisters in Christ. In doing so, we are also serving Christ. When Saul of Tarsus was on the road to Damascus he encountered the Lord. Jesus asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" To be clear, Saul had never lifted a finger against Jesus directly. Jesus identifies with His sheep to such an extent that an attack on

them is an attack on Him. As we see in the teaching of the sheep and the goats, indifference toward the people of God is an outward display of an inward indifference toward God Himself.

It is important to recognize that this is not teaching that those who do good works will be saved by them. Rather, it is a way to identify those who have truly trusted and followed Christ. 1 John 4:7-8 reveals where this love for our brothers in Christ comes from: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

"True believers serve their brothers and sisters in Christ. In doing so, they are also serving Christ Himself."

Matthew 26 and 27 are, by far, the longest chapters in Matthew's gospel. Matthew includes a great deal of detail surrounding the final twenty-four hours leading up to the death of Jesus. It is an intentional decrease in tempo in order to highlight the extreme significance of every moment of the crucifixion and surrounding events.

Nearly everything that occurs in these two chapters highlights the agony that Jesus encountered on our behalf. Jesus not only experienced horrific evils, He also knew that they were coming. Even the heartwarming moment when the woman in Bethany washed His feet with her expensive perfume, the story concludes with Jesus stating, "she has done it to prepare me for burial."

Perhaps the most intimate glimpse of Jesus we ever find in the gospels is His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. As He was staring down the barrel of impending suffering, Jesus humbly approached the Father in prayer. He asked those famous words, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

What cup was Jesus referencing? This is a reference to a metaphor found scattered across a number of Old Testament books. The imagery is of a defeated enemy being forced to consume a cup of poison. Consider the following:

Psalm 75:8 – "For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs."

Isaiah 51:17 – "Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering."

Jeremiah 51:17 – "Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: 'Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.'"

These and other passages reveal that Jesus' reference to the cup was not merely a reference to impending physical suffering. We should never downplay the horrific nature of the physical violence carried out against Jesus. However, Jesus rightly anticipated something infinitely more brutal – the wrath of God. Isaiah 53:10 says, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief." Jesus knew that He was mere hours away from the full, unvented fury of God's wrath being poured out on Him. He was about to shoulder the eternal weight of judgment for every sin of every sinner who would ever

be saved.

Jesus is described as being sorrowful and troubled. He told His disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." Yet, Jesus did not waver in His mission. He did not refuse to die in our place. He humbly accepted God's plan. "Not my will, but yours be done."

"Jesus knew exactly what He was getting Himself into by going to the cross. He knew what it would cost Him. He knew every sin that you have ever committed and was undeterred in His mission to save you."

The life of Jesus is the central period of time in the entirety of creation history. If we zoom in even further, Matthew 27 (and the other gospel accounts of these events) are like the bullseye at the heart of God's master plan. The death of Jesus is like the atom at the very center of the bullseye. At the cross Jesus, the perfect Son of God, bore the sin of His people. He paid our debt and purchased our redemption.

The Scathing Irony

This chapter is overflowing with ironic events. Jesus, the Just Judge of the universe, stood before an unjust judge. Pilate forced the decision onto the crowd by offering them a choice between a man named Barabbas (whose name means "son of the father") and Jesus, who is the only Son of the Father. Jesus, the only truly innocent person who has ever lived, was condemned as a guilty sinner worthy of death. The Romans abused Him and taunted Him, all the while thinking that it was an insult to call Him the "King of the Jews."

The Torn Curtain

Matthew provides us with an exclusive glimpse into certain details of what occurred directly following the death of Jesus. Matthew's Jewish audience would have certainly been aware that the curtain in the temple had been torn in two. That woven screen had shrouded the entrance to the holy of holies for centuries. It was roughly 60 feet high, 30 feet wide, and layered 4 inches thick. In the Jewish rabbinic literature known as the Talmud, the temple veil is described as being woven so that it could never be torn by human hands. It never was. God the Father ripped it from the top to the bottom, symbolizing that the barrier between God and man had been eliminated. Jesus opened the door to the holy of holies so that sinners like you and I could enter in.

The Empty Graves

Matthew also includes a mysterious mention of a truly shocking miracle: "The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many." (vs. 52–53) Some scholars claim that this is not a literal event. However, those scholars have a difficult time explaining why Matthew would state that these newly raised saints "appeared to many" if this is to be understood symbolically. Either way, this is

clearly designed to highlight that the death of Jesus is the source of our resurrection. His death brings us life.

"His death brings us life. The death of Jesus is the source of our resurrection – the atom at the very center of the bullseye of God's master plan."

An Incomplete Gospel

Acts is the next book that we are going to be covering in the Shepherding Notes. As we make our way through it, I want you to notice the centrality of the resurrection in the apostle's proclamation of the gospel. Although the cross is always the focal point, the story is incomplete without the glorious reality that Jesus is alive. Romans 4:25 tells us that Jesus was "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." The evidence that our justification before God is full and final is found in the risen Christ. Our new way of life is available only because Jesus walked out of the grave. As Christians, we are not merely looking forward to the resurrection of our bodies in eternity. We are currently experiencing the resurrection power as God has raised us spiritually from death to life.

Discrepancies

Skeptics of the Bible often point to Matthew 28 as a point of contention. They argue that some of the details about the resurrection are different here than in the other gospels. Most specifically, Matthew only mentions one angel at the tomb, while John tells us that there were two. It is important to notice that Matthew only speaks about one, but never states that there was only one angel present. He simply chose to describe one of them.

The same Bible deniers who reject the resurrection because of literary choices like these are also the first to claim that the gospel authors colluded with one another when the accounts are word-for-word identical. An unbelieving heart will find any excuse possible to reject the gospel.

Bribery

Matthew's gospel shares the only account we have about the bribery of the guards. Notice that it was the Jews, not the Romans, who paid to cover up the resurrection. This indicates that the religious leaders of Israel were aware of the resurrection, but instead of believing in Jesus, they sought to bury the truth. This fulfills what Jesus said in Luke 16:31: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." No amount of evidence can produce faith. It is a gift from God. Salvation only occurs when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to believe the truth.

The Great Commission

The key to understanding the final verbally given command of Jesus lies in verse 18. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Earthly rulers have often drafted laws that limit the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus has authority to override them. Kingdoms have tried to abolish Christianity. They don't have the position to do that. The highest office in the universe is occupied by Jesus, and nobody has the clearance to rebut, deny, outlaw, or overturn His command. What specifically is His mission for His people? Make disciples. Where? The entire world. Doing what? Teaching them the very same message that Jesus has taught. This is not a complicated mission. Just as the world has no ability to reject His authority, we have no excuse to avoid the daily mission of making disciples.

"The highest office in the universe is occupied by Jesus, and nobody has the clearance to rebut, deny, outlaw, or overturn His command. Make disciples."