

JESUS

the one we've waited for

the gospel of
Matthew

Chapters 1-13 | Winter-Spring 2022



Calendar

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Welcome to Homegroups at SB Community Church

Homegroups have three essential elements:

- Bible study
- Prayer
- Community building

How to thrive in a homegroup:

To build community and trust, we all make every effort to **be prepared, be present, and be real.**

- Expect to spend 45 minutes to an hour preparing for your homegroup gathering. You can split this time up into shorter daily segments. Spend time reading and pondering the passage. Consider the questions and mark any that you particularly want to discuss during homegroup. Come ready to contribute and also to listen to others.
- Try to come each week—this honors the rest of your group and contributes to building the trust and connections that will help us all to grow. Arrive on time if possible. Set your phone aside. Notify your leaders if you won't be able to attend.
- We all long for authentic relationships, and homegroups can be a place where we are truly known and loved. Keep information shared by others confidential.
- If you're comfortable speaking out in a group, or talk a lot, regulate yourself. Leave space for others to talk. Ask questions to draw out others.
- Respect others' views, do not argue, do not interrupt. As trust grows, be willing to build relationships and to encourage each other.

The prayer of our pastoral staff is that each homegroup will grow spiritually, personally, and in community life as we study the Bible together. May you engage in and enjoy the riches of God's word each week!

Homegroups Serving in Children's Ministries



What Is Involved?

- Each homegroup is scheduled to provide childcare helpers 2-3 Sundays between September and June.
- This is strictly a helper role where you are assisting children's ministries leaders as they care for and lead the children.
- To mitigate the risk of Covid, our program will take place entirely outside this fall and extra cleaning protocols are in place.
- Since we will be entirely outside, masks will be optional for children & helpers.
- Be ready to be flexible and serve at a service time you don't normally attend!
- Helpers are placed in the following groups: Nursery, Toddlers, Preschool, and Elementary.
- You will be able to choose your service time and age group when you sign up.

Why Do We Do This?

Our philosophy is that everyone who regularly attends is part of our church family and the larger family of God. We believe it is our privilege and responsibility to care for one another, including the very youngest members. As you minister to SBCC's children, we hope that in the process you would:

- Meet people you might not otherwise meet.
- See God in unexpected ways and places.
- Find a role you may enjoy and in which you might like to serve more regularly.
- Enjoy yourself!

Substitutes:

- If you can't serve one of the Sundays your group is scheduled, you are responsible to find a sub for yourself. Use the emailed link you'll receive to choose another Sunday, make a switch, or sign up a friend in your place.

- Carolee Peterson is a great resource if you need help. (carolee@sbcommunity.org).
- All subs need to be someone who attends SBCC regularly and should be in high school or older.
- We really do need all scheduled slots filled every week!

The Day You Serve:

- MOST IMPORTANT! Please check in at the Info Table 20 minutes before the service starts.
- Report to assigned children's area right away. (Don't stop and talk.) Kids are arriving!
- Sick at the last minute? Call or text Donna Sugano at (805) 705-9573 or Carolee at (805) 895-4064.

Exemptions:

- Those who currently work as a regular Youth Leader or Children's Ministry Leader are exempt.
- Exemptions are not given for the important ministries of Worship, Sound/Projection, Info Table, Greeters, etc., since those roles do not require missing all of the adult service.
- We do give exemptions for health reasons or if there are other situations where it wouldn't be appropriate for someone to care for our children (psychiatric, felony, etc.). We ask that if you fall into this category, please let your homegroup leader know so we can exempt you.

CAROLEE PETERSON

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Sources

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The First Gospel

As this new year begins, we turn our attention to a study of the first gospel. Ever wonder why Matthew comes first in our New Testament collection? Certainly, “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John” has a nice cadence to it in English, but why not John, Matthew, Luke, Mark or some other order? While we don’t believe the order of the New Testament books is a matter of divine inspiration, the answer helps us understand a bit about the nature of what we call “The Gospel according to Matthew.”

As Leon Morris notes, “We should not overlook the fact that throughout most of the centuries of the Christian Church this Gospel has been held to be the most important we have. In the ancient manuscripts it is the first of the four, and in common use it was clearly held to be the most important.”¹ So partly this place of prominence in the New Testament canon was given by virtue of its prominence in use by the early church in teaching and discipling its members.

But it also forms a natural bridge from the Old Testament to the New. By placing Matthew first in the canon, we immediately see Jesus in the context of the story which begins in Genesis and weaves its way through the centuries of Jewish history. From the opening genealogy, we encounter a man who is not just a generic spiritual figure who appears out of thin air, but as Matthew shows him to be: “the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

Many have observed the ‘Jewishness’ of Matthew’s account for this same reason. R.T. France notes, the “Greek New Testament lists fifty-four direct citations of the Old Testament in Matthew and a further 262 ‘allusion and verbal parallels,’ and that is a conservative figure based only on the most widely recognized allusions.”² In other words, one point of emphasis throughout is how Jesus’ life and death comes as the fulfillment of what was written in the Old Testament. One can scarcely read Matthew’s gospel without sensing that “the Old Testament was preparing the way for Christ, anticipating him, pointing to him, leading up to him.”³ Placing Matthew’s gospel at the head of the New Testament accentuates this unity between what we find in the old and new testaments.

The Gospel of Jesus

It might go without saying, but Matthew is a book about Jesus. From beginning to end, this gospel is written to make clear who Jesus is. Every chapter is designed not simply to relay facts, but to declare and convince that Jesus is unique in all of history. He is the Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Lord. Each of these titles, with different shades of meaning, are used to highlight Jesus’ authority and special relationship to God.

1 Morris 2

2 France 10-11

3 Carson 28

Along with these titles, the important theme of God's kingdom helps point to who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. God's kingdom is a frequent topic of Jesus' parables, and his miracles are an expression of God's power and rule. God's kingly rule is present now, but often is imperceptible to many. It is for this reason that Jesus, who is God's royal representative and long awaited heir to David's throne, is unrecognized and scorned by those without spiritual perception. But someday, God's sovereign rule, along with his appointed Ruler, will be revealed in all its glory.

In short, Jesus' miracles and teaching, and especially his death and resurrection, all combine to confront us with a person whose existence requires a response from us. As C.S. Lewis has famously written, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." Hopefully all who read Matthew's gospel will come to the same conclusion!

A Gospel for the Church

Much has been written recently about the dramatic increase of people who are interested in Jesus but not the church—folks who would not identify with any congregation or faith community but perhaps read the Bible for their own personal edification, or who simply appreciate the idea of Jesus and the values they perceive him to represent. This worldview would be far outside the gospel writer's frame of reference!

To begin with, the gospel of Matthew shows a keen interest in the church. In fact, Matthew is the only gospel writer to use the word "church" (16:18, 18:17). As we have seen, there is a strong Jewish flavor to this gospel, but there is also a corresponding emphasis on the international and multiethnic mission of the church. Matthew alone draws attention to the non-Jewish women in the ancestry of Jesus. Matthew alone tells the story of travelers from a distant land who became the first to worship Jesus in this gospel. And of course, Matthew brings his gospel to a conclusion with the instruction to go and make disciples of the nations. These are just examples of a theme that could be traced out further, but for a nascent church that was coming to grips with its identity as related but distinct from its Jewish roots, these are important indications of Matthew's purpose in writing. As Michael Wilkins puts it:

Against the backdrop of a world increasingly hostile to Christianity, the author solidifies his church's identity as the true people of God, who transcended ethnic, economic, and religious barriers to find oneness in their adherence to Jesus Messiah. His gospel becomes a manual on discipleship, as Jew and Gentile are made disciples of Jesus Messiah and learn to obey all that he commanded his original disciples.¹

Because Matthew writes his gospel as a tool for Christian instruction, it is no surprise that Matthew's content and structure serves this end. In terms of content, Matthew includes a heavy dose of Jesus' teaching, which he divides into five key sections.²[5] Many have drawn the parallel between these five sections and the five books of Moses, thus comprising a new Torah for the new people of God. In terms of structure, the way Matthew organized and presented his content shows a teacher's design.

1 Wilkins, 21

2 See the Outline of Matthew on page 10. Note how each of the first five section ends with the block of teaching.

“Writing in a day when the possession of books was not common, he puts a good deal of teaching in a form easily memorized. He also arranges things in threes (three messages to Joseph, three denials of Peter), sevens (seven parables in ch. 13, seven woes in ch. 23), and other numerical groups that could be readily memorized.”¹[6]

As Michael Green convincingly argues, the structure of the whole book places the emphasis on the importance of responding to Jesus’ call to discipleship—and the consequences of not doing so.

The Gospel for You

For almost twenty centuries, readers of Matthew have found exceedingly good news. God’s faithfulness, justice, and compassion are vindicated in the coming of Jesus. Here is the one who fulfills our deepest longings for a leader who can deliver us from our greatest enemies and can lead us into the life which is truly life. He invites –no, commands– us to follow him. It is a calling that requires our all, but gives more than it demands.

As we read and study this gospel together, may God help us to hear anew the voice of the crucified and risen One welcoming us to himself...

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

And may we respond with ready and willing hearts, eager to follow where he leads.

1 Morris, 6

The Pattern of Matthew's Gospel*

Part 1: In and Around Galilee (1:1—13:58)

Part 2: To Jerusalem (14:1 — 28:20)

A. Beginnings (1:1—7:29)	B. Discipleship (8:1—11:1)	C. Accepting or Rejecting Jesus (11:2—13:58)	D. Foreshadowing the Future (14:1—19:1)	E. Judgment —By Jesus, Of Jesus and the Final Judgment (19:2—26:2)	F. The End —And the Beginning (26:3—28:20)
<p>1. Jesus' family tree (1:1-17)</p> <p>2. Birth and childhood (1:18-2:23)</p> <p>3. The beginning of Jesus' work (3:1-4:25)</p> <p>4. TEACHING: Basic teaching for disciples (5:1-7:27)</p> <p><i>When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority. . . .</i> 7:28-29</p>	<p>1. The disciples see Jesus' power to heal (8:1-17)</p> <p>2. Jesus discourages some, but leads the disciples on. They see his power over nature, demonic forces and sin, and his disregard of convention (his call of Matthew) (8:18-9:13)</p> <p>3. Those who see, and those who don't (9:14-34)</p> <p>4. TEACHING: Instructions to disciples as they are sent out to do the work of Jesus (9:35-10:42)</p> <p><i>After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach.</i> 11:1</p>	<p>1. Grounds for accepting (11:2-30)</p> <p>2. The Pharisees reject Jesus (12:1-14)</p> <p>3. Acceptable to the Father</p> <p>a. Healings – leading to quotation from Isaiah</p> <p>b. Jesus accused of working in power of Beelzebul</p> <p>c. Jesus refuses to give sign</p> <p>d. <i>Whoever does the will of my Father. . . is my brother.</i> (12:15-50)</p> <p>4. TEACHING: Parables about the kingdom (13:1-52)</p> <p><i>When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on. . . to his hometown. . .</i> <i>"Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."</i> 13:53-54; 57</p>	<p>Introduction: the death of John the Baptist</p> <p>1. The future for Israel</p> <p>a. Feeding 5,000</p> <p>b. Jesus and Peter (who will be leader of new Israel, the church) walk on water</p> <p>c. Healings</p> <p>d. True worship (14:13-15:20)</p> <p>2. The future for the world</p> <p>a. Healing a Gentile girl</p> <p>b. Feeding 4,000</p> <p>c. Interpreting signs of the times</p> <p>d. Peter's declaration about Jesus (15:21-16:20)</p> <p>3. The more immediate future—Jesus must go to Jerusalem and suffer (16:21-17:27)</p> <p>4. TEACHING: The kind of behavior expected of those entering (on earth) the kingdom Jesus is about to set up (18:1-35)</p> <p><i>When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.</i> 19:1</p>	<p>1. Reversal of human values</p> <p>a. On divorce</p> <p>b. On children brought to Jesus</p> <p>c. on the rich young man</p> <p>d. Parable of labourers in the vineyard</p> <p><i>"So the last will be first, an the first will be last."</i> (19:3-20:16)</p> <p>2. <i>Many are invited, but few are chosen.</i> (20:17-23:39)</p> <p>3. The Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus into condemning himself (22:15-39)</p> <p>4. TEACHING: Predictions and parables about the time of the final judgment (24:1-25:46)</p> <p><i>When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away —and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."</i> 26:1-2</p>	<p>1. Events leading to the arrest of Jesus (26:3-56)</p> <p>2. The trial of Jesus (26:57-27:26)</p> <p>3. The crucifixion (27:27-66)</p> <p>4. The resurrection (28:1-20)</p> <p><i>"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."</i> 20:19-20</p>

* This chart is found in Michael Green's commentary on Matthew, pp. 32-33. He borrowed and adapted it from *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel*, by Elizabeth and Ian Billingham.

Study 1

Matthew 1

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, which most modern readers tend to skim over in the bible. After all, it's just a list of names! But at the same time, the modern interest in finding our own ancestral roots has surged. It's a multi-billion dollar industry! Websites like Ancestry.com that help you trace your family tree, companies like 23andMe that analyze genetic data, and TV shows like "Who Do You Think You Are?" and "Finding Your Roots" all testify to our fascination with family backgrounds.

1. What do you attribute this interest to? What do you know about your own family history?

2. None of the other gospels start the way this one does. Scan the first chapters of Mark, Luke and John. Then read Matthew 1. Make note of what stands out in this introductory chapter. What words or phrases seem significant? What questions come to mind as you read?

From the very start, Matthew is intent on showing Jesus as one who comes in continuity with the story of the Scriptures and as its intended climax. As R.T. France points out,

The first two words of Matthew's gospel are literally "book of genesis." The effect on a Jewish reader is comparable to that of John's opening phrase "In the beginning..." the theme of fulfillment of scripture is signaled from the very start, and these opening words suggest that a new creation is now taking place.¹

3. Look again at the genealogy in Matthew 1:1-17. Which names are familiar to you? What do you know about the cast of characters?

1 France, 28

4. Now compare Matthew's genealogy to Luke's (Luke 3:23-38). What differences do you notice? Why might those differences be significant?

One obvious uniqueness is how Matthew structures his genealogy into three groups of fourteen generations. Clearly, some editing has been done and names have been omitted to make this structure work.¹ Scholars are not all of the same opinion about the significance of the number fourteen to Matthew, but one common suggestion notes that the numerical value of the name David in Hebrew is fourteen.² The point that was made explicit in verse 1 is thereby emphasized by the very structure of the genealogy— Jesus is the Son of David and the true king of God's people.

Matthew specifically identifies Jesus' ancestor David as "the king." Kingship is a major theme in Matthew's gospel and he uses the word 'king' more than any other book in the New Testament.

5. In the New Testament, Jesus is called our savior, shepherd, older brother, Lord, and more. What is the significance of Jesus being "king" and the heir to David's throne?

Another interesting feature of Matthew's genealogy is the inclusion of four women. Leon Morris notes how unusual this is:

It is unusual, though not unexampled, to find names of women in a genealogy, but here we have four... Matthew's four –Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba– are probably all Gentiles... Three of the four are of morally dubious reputation.³

¹ This was not unusual at all and would not have seemed deceptive to the first readers. Matthew's intent is not to give an exhaustive genealogy, but to use his lineage to draw attention to aspects of Jesus' identity.

² In Hebrew there are no vowels and thus the letters in David's name (DVD) are assigned values based on their place in the Hebrew alphabet (4 + 6 + 4). The number 14 thus becomes emblematic of David, the great model of kingship in the Old Testament. This Jewish interpretive technique is known as *gematria*.

³ Morris, 23

6. What does the inclusion of these four unlikely women in the ancestry of Jesus the Messiah teach you about the kind of people God uses to accomplish his purposes? How does this encourage you personally?

Unlike Luke's gospel, Matthew does not tell us anything about the angelic appearance to Mary (Luke 1:26-38) or the Roman census that brought the parents of Jesus to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-5). Rather, he tells the story through Joseph's experience.

7. Look again at verses 18-25. Joseph is faced with a difficult situation. What personal qualities does he exhibit in the way he handles himself? What can you learn from his example as you face messy challenges in life?

As admirably as Joseph responds, make no mistake—the central figure in this story is not the father, but the baby. Matthew leaves no doubt as to who this baby is. He is *Jesus* and he is *Immanuel*. Michael Green draws out the significance of these names.

So here, at the annunciation of Jesus' birth, we are brought face to face with the central theme of the Gospel. God, who has been at work on his people since the times of Abraham, has come among them in person. And he has come for the specific purpose of rescuing them from the mess they have got themselves into. Christianity is not good advice about morals. It is good news about God and what he has done for us.¹

8. How do you think your friends and family who are not Christians would summarize the essence of Christianity? How is that different from embracing the Gospel as the 'good news about God and what he has done for us'?

¹ Green, 60

While the great Christian creeds express belief in the fact that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,” as Matthew describes here, in some circles today, the virgin birth of Jesus is seen as a non-essential to Christian faith.

9. What importance do you see, if any, in the miraculous conception of Jesus?

10. Finally, think about the chapter as a whole. From the very start, what does Matthew want us to know about...

God?

Jesus?

Humanity?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for his faithfulness to his promises. Spend some time thanking God for the remarkable provision of a Savior for all humankind.

Repent. Confess the ways we neglect the amazing reality that God has come to be with us.

Request.

- Ask God to help us keep this gospel truth before us in the midst of our daily responsibilities and tasks.
- Pray for those who feel unworthy and broken, outsiders to the things of God. Ask God that our church would be a place of welcome and encouragement for those who consider themselves unlikely to be used by God.
- Pray for those who, like Joseph, find themselves in difficult circumstances and in need of direction. Pray that Joseph’s model of obedience and trust would be followed by us in response to God’s direction.

Study 2

Matthew 2

Each year around Christmas we set out our nativity scenes that depict the wise men bringing gifts to Jesus. And we sing “We Three Kings,” the great carol that reflects on the symbolic meaning of the gifts that were offered to the child-Messiah. Think about your experience with gifts.

1. What is the most meaningful gift you’ve received? What’s the most significant gift you’ve given?

2. Read Matthew 2. Jot down anything you notice that is interesting to you or initially prompts questions.

Verse 1 introduces us to some characters you may know little to nothing about. Learning a bit more about them helps give the story we find here greater depth and meaning.

So who was “Herod the king”? Ironically, this man who reigned as king of the Jews was not himself a Jew, or only half Jewish at most. He was appointed king of the Jews by the Romans in 40 B.C., took control of the nation in 37 B.C. and ruled until his death in 4 B.C.¹ We know plenty from other historical accounts about his maneuvering for power with the likes of Mark Antony, Octavian, and Cleopatra. He was a manipulative tyrant who would do anything to cling to power, as we will see later in the chapter.

And who were these “wise men” who came to see Jesus? The Greek word is “Magoi.” Michael Wilkins explains who these men were:

The term “Magi” originally referred to a priestly caste in ancient Persia, perhaps followers of Zoroaster (c.630?-550? B.C.), a Persian teacher and prophet. Babylonian elements were subsequently introduced, including astrology, demonology, wisdom, and magic. Magi were usually leading figures in the religious court life of their country of origin, employing a variety of

1 Obviously, this means Jesus was born prior to that. You can thank a 6th century monk named Dionysius the Small for misplacing the B.C./ A.D. divide by several years!

scientific (astrology), diplomatic (wisdom), and religious (magical incantations) elements in their work.¹

3. Make note of what you learn about these characters from Matthew 2. How are they similar to one another? How are they different?

The 'wise men' went to great lengths to seek Jesus and brought him costly gifts. As the saying goes, "wise men (and women) still seek him" and in recognition of who Jesus is, offer him tribute and worship.

4. How are you 'seeking Jesus'? What kind of time, treasure, talents do you offer him? Do you offer him gifts that are fit for a king, or simply what is convenient for you?

The arrival of these non-Jewish worshippers picks up on a major theme in Matthew's gospel. We saw in chapter one the surprising presence of Gentile women in Jesus' ancestry. The gospel will end with a commandment to go make disciples of all nations. Here in chapter two, we get a foretaste of what is coming and a fulfillment of prophecies that the nations would come and honor the Messiah with treasures.²

5. Consider the global expansion of the Christian church. Do some quick Google searches. In what countries is the church growing most rapidly today? Which are the least reached countries?

1 Wilkins, 93

2 See Psalm 72:8-11, Isaiah 60:4-6, Zephaniah 3:10, Haggai 2:7-8

Like the Magi, Herod made an outward display of his desire to honor this newborn king saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." (v. 8). The child he speaks of will have much to say about such hypocrisy when he grows up. Read the following verses:

Matthew 6:1-6

Matthew 23:1-7

Matthew 24:45-51

6. What forms of hypocrisy do we need to guard ourselves from today? How might our actions reveal what we worship in place of Jesus?

Upon finding out that he had been deceived by the wise men, Herod let loose his wrath on the children of Bethlehem. Scholars estimate that somewhere between 10-30 children were probably put to death by his edict. This was not out of character for Herod. He had a reputation for ruthlessness that was well deserved.

He slaughtered the last remnants of the Hasmonean dynasty of Jewish high-priestly kings who had ruled before him. He executed more than half the Sanhedrin. He killed 300 court officers out of hand. He executed his own Hasmonean wife, Mariamne, her mother Alexandra, and his sons Aristobulus, Alexander and Antipater. Finally, as he lay dying, he arranged for all the notable men of Jerusalem to be assembled in the Hippodrome and killed as soon as his own death was announced. A man of ruthless cruelty and with a fanatical neurosis about any competition, it is quite in character that he should order the execution of the male children of in Bethlehem.¹

7. Think about the contrast between King Herod, who would do anything to cling to power, and King Jesus, who willingly laid his life down for the sake of others. How does your life, marriage, work, etc. display patterns or tendencies of self-protection or self-sacrifice?

¹ Green, 71

N.T. Wright writes:

The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born in a land and time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Banish all thoughts of the peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head... This is how Israel's Redeemer was to appear; this is how God would set about liberating his people and bringing justice to the whole world. If he is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be with us where the pain is.¹

8. Where are the places of pain in our world where "God-with-us" is needed? In our community? In our church? In your family?

In verses 13-15, we read of the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt to live as refugees during the remainder of Herod's reign.

9. Do you think the fact that Jesus himself experienced life as a foreign refugee should impact the way that we think about the nature of refugees and immigration today? Explain.

Chapter 2 ends with a statement that has puzzled Bible students for years. "And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene." The puzzling thing is there is no specific prophecy of this sort in the Old Testament. Leon Morris explains:

No passage even resembles this. It appears that Matthew is drawing attention to the thrust of Old Testament prophecy about the Christ rather than to any one passage. Jesus went to Galilee so that what was written about him in the prophets would be fulfilled, and we see this in his being called the Nazarene, a citizen of an obscure and unimportant town. Had he been known as "Jesus of Bethlehem" he would have had the aura of one who came from the royal city; there would have been overtones of messianic majesty. But "Jesus the Nazarene" carried with it overtones of contempt. We are to understand the prophets as pointing to one who would be despised and rejected, and Jesus as fulfilling this by his connection with obscure Nazareth.²

1 Wright, 12-13

2 Morris, 49. See Nathanael's response in John 1:45-46 as evidence of what Morris proposes.

This week we've read a story of two radically different responses to Jesus. One group comes with gifts and honors Jesus while another wants him dead. Strong reactions indeed! Matthew wants us to see both the unique identity of Jesus, the true king who is worthy of worship, while at the same time the shadow of the cross even at this early stage in the story.

10. Take a moment to record your own reaction to Jesus. Write a prayer of worship, offer him your life, or perhaps even record your questions and acknowledge your pain. He will receive it all.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Honor Jesus, who unlike so many other kings, chose the route of self-sacrifice and rejection for our salvation.

Repent. Confess your own inconsistency and hypocrisies to the Lord. Thank him, the only perfectly consistent and sincere worshiper of God, that he purchased your forgiveness on the cross.

Request. Pray for our church and the church at large, that we would be known for our generosity and welcome more than hypocrisy and pretense.

- Pray for those in positions of authority. (See 1 Timothy 2:1-2) Pray that they would focus on serving those under their authority more than how they can retain their positions of power.
- Pray for those you know who have not bowed their knee to Christ. (See 1 Timothy 2:3-6). Ask that God would open their eyes to the glory of Jesus and that they would offer themselves as willing servants to the King of kings.
- Consider emailing hello@sbcommunity.org and asking for the missions prayer guide so you can pray for our local and global partners who are working to bring the gospel to the nations. Even if you don't have this list, pray for the missionaries you can think of. Pray for God's favor upon them so that many would respond like the Magi, bowing before the King of kings to worship!

Not only is Matthew continuing his emphasis on Jesus as king, but strikingly, Matthew and the other gospel writers have no trouble identifying “the Lord” (who is clearly God in Isaiah 40) as Jesus.

3. A skeptic of the Christian faith might say that Jesus never claimed he was God. Besides this passage, what other clues from the New Testament can you think of that reveal that Jesus was indeed the incarnate Son of God?

The required method of preparing for this king is clear: repentance. “Repent” was not only the theme of John’s preaching, it was also central to the preaching of Jesus and the disciples he sent out. As Michael Green puts it, “Without repentance there is no way in which a person can respond to the good news and become a member of the Kingdom of heaven. Repentance is the inescapable beginning.”

4. What does repentance mean? What do you think it means to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance”?

John’s primary activity along with preaching was baptizing. The Jews were familiar with baptizing Gentile converts to Judaism. But John’s baptism had several important distinctions:

First, John’s baptism was given to Jews, and emphatically denoted that the recipients’ Jewish heritage could not save them. Secondly, it was not self-administered, as proselyte baptism was. If you were going to be fit for the Kingdom, you could not make yourself so... Thirdly, ... John insists that repentance means submitting to the judgment of God either in reality (*the coming wrath*) or else in symbol by repentance and entering into the river. For the river was a picture of the judgment and mercy flowing from God’s throne, and bringing forgiveness of sins and life in the Messiah’s Kingdom.¹

Leon Morris helps ensure we do not miss the imagery.

Since Christians are familiar with baptism only as a religious ceremony, we are apt to miss some of its meaning. But the verb means “dip, plunge” and in the passive “be drowned”; it is used of ships in the sense [of] “sink”... We should not miss the significance of this violent imagery. Baptism signifies death to a whole way of life.²

¹ Green, 77-78

² Morris, 55-56

5. Have you been baptized? If so, tell your homegroup about it and what it meant or means to you.¹

6. John comes down hard on those who had an undue confidence in how their ancestry positioned them with God. What kind of claims might be equivalent for us in the church that are equally useless in making us right with God?

There are two gripping images of judgment in the middle of this passage.

7. Look again at the following verses. What do the metaphors mean? Who is in danger?

Verse 10 (“the axe is laid to the root of the trees”)

Verse 12 (“his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear this threshing floor... and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”)

We may understand the significance of baptism for sinners who have found new life in Christ, but do you find yourself scratching your head as to why Jesus was baptized by John? If so, you’re not alone. But Jesus gives us an indication of the purpose– “to fulfill all righteousness”. (verse 15)

But in what sense does Jesus’ baptism “fulfill all righteousness?” We will do well to see Jesus’ baptism as the inauguration of his whole ministry. In his baptism, Jesus was identifying with those he came to make righteous and dedicating himself to all it would take to accomplish the task. As Isaiah said, “he was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).

¹ If you are a Christian and have not been baptized, let’s make plans to do so in obedience to the clear expectation of the Scriptures! If you are unsure if you’re ready, we would love to help you figure this out. Check out our baptism guide at https://www.sbcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SBCC_AdultBaptismGuide2.pdf.

8. Read the following verses and reflect on the significance of Jesus identifying with us:

2 Corinthians 5:21

Hebrews 2:10-18

9. As Jesus was raised from the waters of baptism, two remarkable and related things occurred. First, the Spirit of God descended on him. Secondly, the God the Father spoke to Jesus, using words from two Old Testament passages. Read and summarize these verses:

Psalm 2 (especially vv. 7-8)

Isaiah 42:1-4 (especially v.)

Michael Wilkins points out the significance:

As the background to the Father's declaration, these passages point out two distinct emphases of Jesus' identity, self-understanding, and mission. (1) He is the divine Son and the suffering Servant. (2) Through the anointing by the Spirit, the Father formally inaugurates Jesus into his public ministry as the unique Son, who is the triumphant messianic King (Psalm 2), yet the humble Servant (Isaiah. 42). He will accomplish his Father's will in coming to his people Israel, yet he brings hope to the nations.¹

What a dramatic beginning to Jesus' ministry! Every line of Matthew's gospel is rich with meaning and is designed to unveil the glorious plan of God.

10. As you finish this study, take a moment to write down some reflections from your study of Matthew 3. How does what you've seen in this chapter affect your view of Jesus? How does it challenge or encourage you?

¹ Wilkins, 143-44

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Think about the Triune God we see in action at Jesus' baptism. Praise the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the part each plays in our salvation. Praise the Lord for being the perfect and impartial Judge and also the perfect and willing sacrifice who has borne our just judgment.

Repent. Ask God what you, and we as a church, need to repent of. Ask him for the courage to follow through and prepare for his coming.

Request. Pray for those who are in danger of judgment. Pray that God would give them a responsive heart, ready to turn back to the One who is willing to forgive and restore.

Study 4

Matthew 4

The first three chapters of Matthew serve as a sort of prologue to the rest of the book. Here in chapter 4 Jesus begins his ministry. But as we'll see, what becomes in a short time a very public, acclaimed ministry starts in a solitary, unglamorous way.

1. What's something you've achieved that required a lot of advance preparation?

Read Matthew 4. As usual, before going on in the study, record some initial observations and questions that come to your mind as you read the passage.

This chapter begins with the surprising words, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The same Spirit that had just rested on Jesus at his baptism, marking him out as God's beloved, now leads him to a place where the devil will test him. Later in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus will teach us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," and yet here we see the Spirit seeming to do just that.

2. While we know from James 1:13 that God does not entice anyone to sin, it seems clear here that God has a purpose in allowing his Son to be tempted by the devil. What do you make of this?

As we have seen, one constant theme in Matthew's gospel is the way Jesus fulfills the scriptures. But perhaps you've been confused by Matthew's use of the Old Testament so far. You may have noticed that the scriptures he chooses to cite are not usually specific predictions about a coming Savior. Rather, Matthew wants us to see throughout that Jesus comes as the fulfillment of God's plans for his people. Michael Green points out how this is true in chapter 4:

What did the temptations mean for humanity? ... Adam had disobeyed God, though he knew he was God's son. Adam had grabbed at sensual satisfaction because of the hunger of his body. And the last Adam won where the first Adam fell. Here is the recapitulation of history. Jesus succeeded where Adam failed.¹

Not only that, but as N.T. Wright notes,

The biblical texts Jesus used as his key weapons are all taken from the story of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus had come through the waters of baptism, like Israel crossing the Red Sea. He now had to face, in forty days and nights in the wilderness, the equivalent of Israel's forty years in the desert. But where Israel failed its tests again and again, Jesus succeeded. Here at last is a true Israelite, Matthew is saying. He has come to do what God always wanted Israel to do— to bring light to the world.²

As we saw in the last study, Jesus' baptism was his commissioning for ministry as God's beloved Son and suffering Servant. The temptations are aimed directly at the nature of this ministry.

3. Look again at the three temptations Jesus faced in verses 1-11. For each one, consider how Satan attempted to derail this mission. What does each represent? (In other words, the first temptation was about more than just making bread out of stones. What was the devil's aim and why would it have been out of line for Jesus to do it? A suggestion has been given to you for temptation 3.)

Temptation #1

Temptation #2

Temptation #3

"Serve the devil and rule the world. In modern terms, be practical, realistic, ready to compromise; 'the end justifies the means.' To help people you must get position and power."³

1 Green, 83

2 Wright, 21

3 Floyd Filson quoted in Morris, 77

- Now look again at the way Jesus' responded to each of Satan's temptations. What does each tell us about the way Jesus understood what it means to live on mission for God?

Response #1

Response #2

Response #3

Jesus faced the temptations of Satan by recalling Scripture. Clearly, our Lord had spent much time reading, memorizing, and reflecting on the meaning of God's word.

- What are your habits with regard to the Bible? (Do you read it? Meditate on it? Memorize it? Study it? Pray it?) Share with your homegroup your strategies for getting God's word in your heart.
- How has Scripture helped you meet temptation or kept you from being distracted from God's purposes?

In verses 18-22 we read of the calling of first disciples. Of course, there was more to the story than what is recorded here,¹ but Matthew records the decisive moment of their call to become apprentices of Jesus and their response. These men made a decisive break with their former way of life to follow Jesus, but received a new vocation and purpose in return.

¹ See for example John 1:35-42, which gives more background to Peter and Andrew's story.

7. What have you had to leave to follow Jesus? What have you gained?

8. Consider Jesus' promise that he would make them "fishers of people." What did that mean? What does fishing for people look like in your context?

This chapter ends with a summary of how Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing began to reach more and more people. Matthew summarizes his message in verse 17 as "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" and in verse 23 as proclaiming "the gospel of the kingdom."

9. Are these two different messages or the same? What is meant by "the gospel of the kingdom" Compare your thoughts with your homegroup.

As we will see, the summary of Jesus' activities in verse 23 serves as the opening to a longer block of Jesus' teaching in chapters 5-7 that is directed specifically toward his disciples. What are the implications for the people who have gladly received this news of the kingdom of God? A new life is beginning for them as a community of Jesus followers, but what will that mean—for their relationships with one other, for their relationship to the world, for their devotional lives, for their understanding of the law of Moses, for their values and attachments? We're about to learn more!

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Thank God that he did not send us “a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

Repent. Talk to God about the temptations that have ensnared you. Ask for help to repent and to resist with his strength. Pray for people in our church family and in your homegroup who are tempted by all sorts of sins (pornography, gossip, greed, drunkenness, selfishness, etc.). Ask that they would draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

Request. Pray for those who have not yet heard the gospel of the kingdom. Pray that God would raise up more messengers to bring this good news where it has not yet been heard so that those dwelling in darkness would see a great light. Pray that God would give you opportunities to be his mouthpiece and ask God to open their eyes to the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

Last week, we read that Jesus was traveling around the region of Galilee doing three types of things: **teaching**, **proclaiming** the good news about the kingdom of God, and **healing** (see especially 4:17 and 4:23). Over the next six weeks, we get to focus on the “teaching” part, exploring the first of five larger blocks of Jesus’ teaching found in the book of Matthew.¹ It’s commonly known as The Sermon on the Mount and it’s contained in chapters 5-7. Later, chapters 8 and 9 will go into more detail on Jesus’ healing activities.

If you can, read through all three chapters in one sitting, or listen to them in an audio format.² This block of teaching is well known even among people who aren’t believers; it contains many sayings and phrases that some may even be surprised to learn are Jesus’ words. Much has been written about the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ assertions here are challenging and often startling, and may leave his hearers wondering how to interpret them.

A good place to begin is to look at the “who, what, where” questions. Is there any significance to the fact that we’re hearing “the Sermon on the Mount” instead of the Sermon Anywhere Else? As many scholars point out, the fact that Jesus goes up on a mountain to deliver this teaching gives the listeners an important connection to the Old Testament—it’s a clue for us to remember Moses climbing Mount Sinai. Here it is worth quoting one author at length:

In Exodus 24 and 34, we read that when Moses went up the mountain he was in the presence of God, and God spoke to him. When Jesus ‘went up the mountain’ at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, it means that just as Moses went into the presence of God and God spoke to him and Moses delivered God’s word to the people, here Jesus brings us into the presence of God and God speaks to us through Jesus. (Stassen 2) ...In his teachings, and particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that God is speaking again, coming to be present again and to deliver us. God is coming to deliver us from our vicious cycles of anger and violence, unfaithfulness and adultery, manipulation and deceit, materialism and greed—and our double-mindedness, from our separation from God.”³

Also important is the “who” question. In 5:1-2, it sounds as though Jesus is getting away from the crowds to speak only to his disciples. In 7:28-29, it sounds as though “the crowds” have been there all along. Most scholars agree, however, that the teaching is most particularly for people committed to living as Jesus’ disciples. The content of the Sermon is for them (and us)—how are we to conduct our lives, spiritually and relationally, as citizens of this kingdom?

1 We’ll find the other four in chapters 10, 13, 18, and 23-25.

2 On YouTube, search for “Audio Sermon on the Mount” for a variety of options for hearing these chapters read aloud. The Streetlights Bible app is also a unique way to hear the text (<https://www.streetlightsbible.com/streetlights-bible-matthew> or find it in the app store on your mobile device). Also highly recommended is the “Dwell” app for mobile devices, a high-quality audio Bible available with a yearly subscription fee.

3 Stassen, 6

But it goes far beyond mere behavior management, and we will miss much if we read the Sermon primarily as a checklist of rules. As Wright says, “Jesus takes the commands of the law and shows how they provide a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, gloriously human. This new way, which Jesus had come to pioneer and make possible, goes deep down into the roots of personality and produces a different pattern of behavior altogether.”¹ And here’s Stassen again:

The Sermon on the Mount is not first of all about what *we should do*. It is first of all about what *God is already doing*. It is about God’s presence, the breakthrough of God’s kingdom in Jesus. It is about God’s grace, God’s loving deliverance *from* various kinds of bondage in the vicious cycles that we get stuck in, and deliverance *into* community with God and others.”²

1 Wright, study guide 26

2 Stassen, 8

Study 5

Matthew 5:1-16

Our passage this week is Matthew 5:1-16, often referred to as “The Beatitudes” (from the Latin word for “blessed”). Jesus makes some dramatic and even startling statements about the “upside down” reality of life in the Kingdom of God.

1. Read these sixteen verses before going on in the study. What is interesting or confusing? What is familiar or unfamiliar? What is disconcerting? Jot down any notes or questions here.

What should we, as disciples, do with these “blessed are” statements? N.T. Wright helps to provide an interpretive lens as we go forward.

Many people read this passage of the Sermon on the Mount as instructions—this is how disciples should behave! While this isn’t completely false, Jesus’ statements about who is blessed function as a pronouncement, a description of the reality of life in his kingdom. Jesus is telling us that with his work these things start to come true. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It is gospel—an announcement of wonderful news, not good advice...This list of wonderful news is part of his invitation, part of his summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way and this is what it looks like.¹

2. Looking at verses 3-12, what big themes do you discern? Try to sum up the overall message in a few sentences.

1 Wright Study Guide 25

3. The terms “bless,” “blessing,” and “blessed” show up a lot in the Bible, but what do they mean? Try to recall some other contexts in the Bible where these terms show up, and then come up with your own definition for what Jesus might mean when he says that someone is “blessed.”

On the subject of what “blessed” means in the Beatitudes, according to John Stott,

Though the Greek can and does mean ‘happy,’ it is seriously misleading to render it ‘happy’ in this case. Happiness is a subjective state, whereas Jesus is making an objective judgment about these people. He is declaring not what they may feel like (‘happy’), but what God thinks of them and what, on that account, they are: they are ‘blessed.’”¹

4. These statements about who is to be considered as “blessed” are sometimes quite different from what and who our culture would consider “blessed.” Give some examples of what you think “blessed” looks like to people without faith in Jesus.

5. Is there one of Jesus’ “blessed are” statements that grabs you? Choose one to focus on and ponder, and be ready to share with your homegroup what it means to you and why.

Look at verses 11 and 12. These are the first disciples, “Christianity” is brand new, and one of the first things Jesus teaches his crew is what to do when they are forced to suffer for their allegiance. Don’t breeze past the implications of this!

1 https://johnstott.org/bible_studies/18-sep-2017/

6. How do verses 11 and 12 fit with the previous verses?

7. How is it possible to “rejoice and be glad” when you’re suffering pain or humiliation? If you’ve experienced it or seen it, share with your homegroup what this kind of rejoicing looked like.

Read through verses 13-16 again. Think about what salt and light are for.¹ Jesus is challenging his followers to embody their calling to be a distinctive presence in the world—to keep it from going bad and to allow people walking in the dark to find their way.

8. Make a list of some of the spaces you’ve inhabited this week (for example: home, workplace, social media feed, gym, pickle ball courts, grocery store etc.). Next to each one, note some ideas for ways you might serve as a flavorful, preserving, or guiding presence there.

9. With your homegroup, compare notes on the characteristics of Jesus’ kingdom laid out in these verses. Where are your own values and priorities most challenged?

¹ In the ancient world, in the absence of refrigeration, salt was used as a preservative for meat.

As you finish up this week, take a moment to read this quote from N.T. Wright. Next week's passage will take us further into the Sermon on the Mount, and this week's verses about salt and light serve as a heading for what's coming next.

Israel was the people through whom God intended to shine his bright light into the world's dark corners, not simply to show up evil but to enable people who were blundering around in the dark to find their way. But what if the people called to be the light-bearers had become part of the darkness? That was Jesus' warning—and also his challenge. Jerusalem, the city set on a hill, was supposed to be a beacon of hope to the world. His followers were to be like that: their deep, heartfelt keeping of God's laws would be a sign to the nations around that the one God, the creator, the God of Israel, was God indeed, and that they should worship him.¹

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Take stock of all the things you've reflected on in this passage that lead you to gratitude. Worship and thank him for his character as you see it reflected here.

Repent. Be honest before God about where your values do not line up with what you see in this passage.

Request. Ask God to work on you—your heart, your values, your priorities, the things and people you consider “blessed”—in such a way that reflects the values of his kingdom. Pray for those who are not regarded by the world's standards, that in Christ they would find salvation and the joy of his upside-down kingdom. Pray for persecuted Christians around the world. (See www.persecution.com)

¹ Wright, 40

Study 6

Matthew 5:17-48

Before going on to the questions, read or listen to Matthew 5:17-48 very carefully. It's a striking passage, and Jesus intends his listeners to sit up and take notice. Which parts spark strong feelings for you?

Focus on verses 17-20 for a moment. With these comments, Jesus is introducing the main theme for what will follow in the next section. As N.T. Wright puts it,

He has come to fulfill the law and the prophets. Most of the rest of the Sermon explains exactly what that means...Our present passage [17-20], then, is a kind of gateway to all that will follow, and its theme is clear. Jesus is calling the Israel of his day to BE Israel indeed, now that he is there.¹

And what is more central to what it means to “be” Israel than to honor and fulfill its laws and commandments? In verses 21-48, Jesus discusses six specific examples drawn from the Mosaic Law. If you need to brush up on the Ten Commandments, read Exodus 20. But here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is showing his people that all these commandments point to a deeper, more holistic reality than just going through the motions of rule-keeping. In fact, as we have been discussing, “he is unveiling a whole new way of being human.”² In Jesus’ person and his teachings we begin to see the amazing, upside-down Kingdom of God—a reality toward which, in fact, all of Israel’s laws and traditions have been pointing all along! Let’s take a closer look.

1. Jesus’ first example deals with anger among “brothers,” meaning his disciples. Why would he make such a strong point about anger and conflict among Christians?

1 Wright, 40

2 Wright, 49

2. In your experience, what is it that makes reconciliation so hard? Talk about this with your homegroup and commit to praying for each other for specific situations where you are finding it hard or impossible to pray or act toward the kind of reconciliation Jesus is talking about.

Next we have the subject of lust. N.T. Wright is helpful again here:

Jesus says clearly, deal ruthlessly with the first signs of lust. Plucking out eyes and cutting off hands are deliberate exaggerations, but they make the point very forcibly. Don't suppose Jesus means you must never feel the impulse of lust, which is impossible; that's not what the words mean. He commands us to avoid the extended gaze and the lustful imagination that follow the initial impulse. Choosing not to be swept along by inappropriate sexual passion may well feel on occasion like cutting off a hand—and our world has frequently tried to tell us that doing this is very bad for us. But, for neither the first nor the last time, we must choose to obey our Lord rather than the world.¹

3. As you think about that, is there anything you sense God might be nudging you to get rid of?

Divorce is a topic that hits very close to home for many of us, and we have to grapple with the pain that is inevitable when a covenant is broken. There is disagreement among various Christian traditions as to how to interpret Scripture on the subject.² Jesus' teachings on divorce later in Matthew point to the creation narrative to demonstrate God's intention for marriage as a faithful lifetime commitment. Here and in chapter 19, he appears to be addressing questions about perceived loopholes in the laws about marriage. Instead, in the broader context of the vision he casts for life in the kingdom of God, followers of Jesus should look beyond arguments about when and why a marriage covenant can be broken.

¹ Wright Study Guide, 27

² Besides Matt. 5:31-32, see also 19:3-12, Mk 10:2-12, Lk 16:18, 1 Cor 7:10-16

Jesus was saying to his followers: do God's will for marriage and stop asking when it is permissible to do less. So [he] redirects our attention...If Christian ethics is following Jesus, the divorce question should be asked in something like the following way: *How shall we participate alongside God in creating, nurturing and preserving marriages that reflect God's intent for this holy covenant and that last for a joyous lifetime?* This leads directly to two other questions: *What are some of the attitudes and behaviors that destroy marriages? What concrete practices must we develop as spouses and churches that can help deliver us from marital discord and alienation and thus strengthen and preserve marriage?*¹

This brings us to our next question. Jesus' mention of divorce falls between discussion of two other topics.

4. In light of the previous quote, how could these passages shed light on his teaching on divorce?

5. Jesus' comments about the swearing of oaths point to the second commandment, not to take the Lord's name in vain. Apart from the dishonoring use of God's name, what damage is done when people lie or make inflated promises?

Re-read verses 38-48. Here we have a way of responding to difficult people and situations that is radically different from what our instincts might suggest. Instead of retaliating, "ghosting" or cutting off relationships, the kingdom of God shows us relationships characterized by a love so generous that it seems almost ridiculous. N.T. Wright has a great question for us:

6. The examples Jesus gives [in verses 38-48] are only little sketches to give you the idea. Whatever situation you are in, you need to think it through for yourself. Despite pressure and provocation, despite your own anger and frustration, what would it mean for you to reflect God's generous love? Consider specific people and situations.²

1 Stassen & Gushee, 277

2 Wright Study Guide, 28

7. To whom do you love to give—whether it's materially or spiritually (love, grace, forgiveness etc.)? And to whom do you dread being generous? Why? Take time to reflect on the heart conditions that verses 38-48 might address in you.

This week's passage has a lot to think about and process, and some parts you may be struggling with. It is possible to interpret Jesus' words as the setting of impossibly high standards for disciples (i.e. "You have heard it said...but I tell you..."). We see that Jesus forbids anger, lust, divorce, etc., and we know we can't possibly live up to this level of perfection, so we either dismiss or ignore the teachings, or get trapped in a cycle of legalism and guilt. However, the key ingredient is the grace and power of God that is at work in the world and available to us through the Holy Spirit.

8. Together with your homegroup, reflect on and respond to this quote from Glen Stassen.

The Christian life is not just hard human effort to live up to high ideals; nor is it just a bunch of duties. It is about God's grace. It is about living in the presence of God. It is the invitation of Jesus to participate in the new things God is doing all the time. We are allowed, privileged, and invited to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him as he shows us how to act in the way that fits with what God is doing in our midst.¹

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. In this week's passage, what gives you reason to rejoice? In prayer, dwell on God's vision for human relationships to be honoring, loving, and grace-filled.

Repent. Search your heart and ask God to show you a way forward out of the vicious cycles of sin that damage your relationships with others.

Request. Pray for your own relationships, and for relationships within our church to be characterized by the redemptive, reconciling, and self-sacrificing love of Christ.

¹ Stassen, 16

Study 7

Matthew 6:1-18

Last week, we worked through Jesus' teachings on the Law as it is embodied and fulfilled in himself and among his disciples in the Kingdom of God. This week, Jesus continues to show us what that "new way of being human" looks like. Wilkins is helpful here:

Throughout church history the practice of the full panoply of spiritual disciplines has been a key to spiritual growth. These "disciplines" are viewed from different perspectives. One way is to view them as a threefold unity: inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, study), outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, celebration)¹...The important point is to remember that the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven is an inside-out process, which Jesus intentionally orients to counteract the hypocritical practice of operating only on the surface.²

Here, Jesus discusses three aspects of Jewish devotion: giving, praying, and fasting. He urges his listeners to practice these disciplines of faith with a heart that truly seeks after the heart of God.

1. Read Matthew 6:1-18. If it's helpful, take notes as you read or underline key words and ideas.

2. Focus on verses 1-6. What do you think is the "why" behind this teaching? How does "practicing righteousness before other people" shape a person's heart?

¹ From Richard Foster's classic book on Christian practice, *Celebration of Discipline*

² Wilkins, 286

3. On the surface, 6:1 might seem contradictory to what Jesus has just said in 5:16. How might you balance both principles?

4. Notice the phrase, repeated three times, that “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” What do you think Jesus means by this?

5. Think about your spiritual habits and practices. Which of these do you think you’d continue to do even if no one saw or knew you did them?

6. Consider what Jesus says about prayer in verses 7-15. If you were explaining this to someone who’s never read it, how would you summarize what he says about how not to pray and how to pray?

7. Re-read verses 16-18. Jesus assumes that his disciples fast regularly as a spiritual discipline according to Jewish traditions. What has your experience been with fasting? If you have explored this spiritual discipline, share with your homegroup how it has impacted your heart toward God.

8. Looking back on this week's passage, is there any one thing that particularly stands out to you as an invitation to reframe your habits, values or priorities?

Prayer Guide

"The Lord's Prayer" (verses 9-13) has been cherished by Christians all over the world for two thousand years. If you've never memorized this prayer, work on it this week!

Use the shape of the Lord's Prayer this week as a template each time you pray, on your own and with your homegroup.

- Begin by remembering who God is and what your relationship to him is.
- Honor and lift up his holy name, his character and attributes.
- Ask for his kingdom to break through in this world. Name specific ways and places.
- Ask for God to do what he desires to do; that your actions, and the actions of believers everywhere, would align with God's purposes and character.
- Bring to God whatever needs you are aware of today, for yourself and for your community.
- Confess any sins God brings to your mind. Open up your heart to your loving Father and repent as humbly as you can.
- Remembering how much you have been forgiven, ask God to help you forgive anyone who has offended or hurt you.
- Pray for protection from temptation, harm and evil; any threats to your body or your soul.

Study 8

Matthew 6:19-34

Anxiety is everywhere. It has been a prominent reality in modern life for a long time, but between August 2020 and February 2021, as the Covid-19 pandemic raged, the CDC tracked an increase from 36.4% to 41.5% of adults with recent symptoms of an anxiety or depressive disorder.¹ Whether the contributing causes are mainly medical, spiritual, or emotional, the bottom line is that human beings are prone to fear and worry about what may happen next. Jesus knows this about us, and in this week's passage he has a lot to say to encourage us.

In verse 30, Jesus addresses his friends as “you of little faith.” Because this phrase will come up several more times in Matthew, it's worth unpacking this phrase a little bit further, and the NLT Study Bible has some helpful clarifications.

The term “little faith” and related Greek terms are used five times in Matthew (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20) and only once elsewhere (Luke 12:28; cp. James 1:6-7). The term refers to a specific event rather than to ongoing and permanent failure. In Matthew, this is due either to lack of knowledge on the part of Jesus' disciples (16:8) or to acting without faith in a particular incident. If someone always lacks faith, it would be described as “unbelief” (see 13:58). As examples of “little faith,” the disciples in 6:30 do not understand their value or God's providential protection; in 8:26 and 14:31 they do not understand God's protection in the midst of physical danger; in 16:8 they do not understand Jesus' saying regarding yeast; and in 17:20 they are not able to exorcise a demon. *These are instances of failure to be consistent with a calling rather than of having no faith whatsoever.*²

1. What are some things you are worrying about this week, whether major or minor?
2. Read Matthew 6:19-34. Write down any thoughts or questions you might have. Note the major themes. Take note of how the two sections (19-24 and 25-34) are related to one another.

1 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7013e2.htm>

2 The NLT Study Bible, emphasis added

3. Look again at verses 19-21, especially verse 21. How has the state of your emotions this week revealed your heart's attachments?

4. What do you think verses 22-23 are all about? How does the context contribute to your understanding?

Go back to the phrase, "you of little faith." As we have seen, this is a phrase Jesus uses to exhort his disciples—people who had put their trust in him as Savior, but who periodically struggled to actually live within that reality in their day-to-day choices and priorities.

5. Reflect on a time when you felt that Jesus was calling you into deeper faith in him or greater faithfulness to his way. What were the circumstances?
6. Take a good amount of time to sit with verse 33. Write in your own words what you think Jesus means by each of these phrases.

The kingdom of God

His righteousness

All these things

N.T. Wright points out, “When Jesus told his followers not to worry about tomorrow, we must assume he led them by example. He seems to have had the skill of living totally in the present, giving attention totally to the present task, celebrating the goodness of God here and now. If that’s not a recipe for happiness, I don’t know what is.”¹

7. How do you imagine your life might look different if you lived like Jesus in this way?

8. Is there a verse or passage from this week you particularly need to take with you into your daily life this week? Write it on a sticky note, add it to your digital calendar as a daily reminder, journal about it, or memorize it—whatever would help to keep it in front of you to remind you to rely on Jesus for the faith you need from moment to moment.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise and thank God for the outrageous promises of care and provision here! Rejoice in the invitation to a non-anxious way of life and in the character of a God who sees your need and promises to care for you.

Repent. If you have identified specific areas of “little faith” in your life, repent of those. Repent of any heart attachments that are preventing you from experiencing a joyful reliance on the goodness of God. Is there anything else in this passage or in your life this week that has helped you to identify sin? Talk to God about it and ask for help to repent.

Request. Pray for more faith! Pray for a non-anxious spirit, a willingness to be content with what you have, a heart that is grateful and joyful in all kinds of circumstances. Pray about your priorities and attachments, that they would reflect Jesus and his kingdom.

¹ Wright Study Guide, 32

Study 9

Matthew 7:1-12

In chapter 7, as Jesus is bringing the Sermon on the Mount to a close, he shifts his conversation from warning about personal temptations to a discussion of true and false discipleship (to be developed further in our passage next week). Before now, he has called certain religious leaders “hypocrites” for projecting a false image of holiness to mask the truth about the state of their hearts. Here, he warns of hypocrisy among his own disciples, while cautioning them against the opposite extreme of being naively undiscerning.¹

1. Before going ahead in this study guide, read carefully through the passage. List the topics Jesus seems to be addressing.

Jesus’ words in our passage this week about judgment are often quoted, by Christians and non-Christians alike. But it’s easy to get confused about what is meant here by the warning not to “judge,” particularly in light of many other scripture passages encouraging believers to use wisdom and discernment (including in the verses that follow in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount). Wilkins clarifies:

Absolute judgment is a categorical pronouncement of the guilt of another person as though this is the final word on a matter. At fault is a person who makes himself and his way of doing things and his opinion the absolute standard. He or she has usurped the place of God because only God can judge in this way. When disciples have developed this critical, condemning attitude as a pattern of life, they have forced love out of their relationships with others.²

Gundry interprets the discussion of judgment more specifically to be referring to believers calling into question one another’s status as true disciples; recalling Jesus’ words in 5:22, he says, Jesus’ warning here is for “any disciple who individually arrogates to himself the divine prerogative of pronouncing a fellow disciple false in his profession of discipleship.”³

1 Wilkins, 308

2 Wilkins, 309

3 Gundry, 26

Either way, we see here a reiteration of principles we've seen earlier in the Sermon– “blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (5:7) and “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (6:12), as well as encouragement to ask God for what we need. Disciples encounter situations and people in day-to-day life that will require us to cultivate humility, discernment, and a close and prayerful reliance on our Father.

1. Recall where we have seen the word “hypocrite” in the text recently (hint: three instances in chapter 6) and who is being addressed. How do the previous instances of this word in chapter 6 shed light on what Jesus is saying to his followers here? In other words, what does it mean here to act hypocritically?
2. Read Matthew 24:4-13. How might this help us to understand 7:6?
3. What experiences –good or bad– have shaped your attitude and habits when it comes to prayer?
4. What is Jesus teaching us about the character of God the Father in verses 7-12?

5. How might you respond to someone who insists that verses 7-8 promise a materially-prosperous life? On the other hand, what about the believers whose difficulties tempt them to believe that these verses simply can't be true?

6. In verse 11, Jesus suggests that God gives good gifts. What are some evidences of that in your own life? Be prepared to share these with your homegroup.

7. How might remembering the goodness of God serve you well in seasons marked by unmet hopes?

8. What is the connection between verse 12 and verses 9-11?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for his character– that he is just, that he cares about our needs.

Repent. Ask God to search your heart for attitudes of harsh judgment against other Christians, for the ways in which you have acted hypocritically, for any failures to love others well.

Request. What do you need right now? Approach your loving Father with all of it, knowing that his desire is to provide what is good for you.

7. Take some time alone, and then with your homegroup, to recall the past six weeks in the Sermon on the Mount. Flip back through your study and look at your notes. What has stuck with you the most? What are you still turning over in your mind? Have you sensed the Holy Spirit speaking to you in a particular area of your life? Have you made any choices as a result of what you've heard?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. In prayer, recall and celebrate the character of God as you have seen it in the Sermon on the Mount.

Repent. Confess to God your tendencies to wander astray and ask for his power to help you walk in the path of a disciple.

Request. After considering Jesus' warnings in these verses, what do you specifically need to ask him for?

Study 11

Matthew 8:1-17

Caller ID has revolutionized the way in which we use our phones. Typically, it is possible to know who is calling long before answering an incoming call. Can you think of a time when you were surprised by the voice on the other end of the line?

It is notable that the three chapters that provide the soaring ethical heights known as the Sermon on the Mount end with the astonishment of the crowds. Matthew 7:28-29 reads, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." It's not hard to imagine the crowds shaking their heads and asking, "Who is this?" The next section of Matthew's Gospel will begin to fill in the answer.

1. Read Matthew 8:1-17 and use the space below to make a note of anything that stands out to you, whether things you notice or questions that arise.

These verses present numerous accounts of healings. Though each of them would have been dramatic and noteworthy, no two are quite alike.

2. Compare and contrast the various healings of verses 1-17. Can you find any elements that are distinct to one of the incidents and not present in the others? On the other side of the coin, what trends emerge across multiple healings?

The story that opens this chapter introduces a man suffering from “leprosy.” This was one of the most serious conditions in the ancient world and, in a culture as concerned with purity as first-century Judaism, would have resulted not only in physical affliction, but also intense social stigma and isolation. Those with skin diseases like leprosy were cut off from the broader community (see Leviticus 13:45-46). Michael Green paints a grim picture:

Leprosy sentenced sufferers to a living death. It cut them off from civilization and made them live alone...The disease gradually spread and sensation ceased; more and more parts of the anatomy became disfigured or fell off. The outcome was death. Never was there a disease that so separated victims from their fellows.¹

Significantly, the Law indicated that anyone who came into physical contact with a leper also became unclean themselves (see Leviticus 5:2-3).

3. With that background in mind, read through verses 1-4 again. What stands out about the man? What stands out about Jesus?

4. Why might Jesus have told the man “See that you don’t tell anyone”? Be prepared to discuss your response with your homegroup.

The next healing story, in verses 5-13, involves another unlikely recipient of blessing: a Roman centurion serving in Palestine. Centurions served as commanders of a detachment of around 100 soldiers and worked to preserve peace and advance the agendas of Rome within an occupied area. In short, the presence of a centurion served as a constant reminder to the Jews of Roman occupation.

5. What does the centurion’s request in verse 6 suggest about his character?

1 Green, BST, 114

6. In verses 8-9, the centurion offers a surprising response to Jesus' willingness to come and heal the servant. What point is the centurion making about Jesus in these verses?

7. The centurion's response elicits very high praise from Jesus in verse 10. Imagine being one of the Jewish people following Jesus. How might his words have struck you emotionally?

8. How do Jesus' words in verses 11-12 relate to the healing of the centurion's servant?

In the final section of this week's passage, Jesus' healing power is on full display in the lives of many, including Peter's mother-in-law. These stories depict Jesus healing with relative ease and simplicity. Commenting on the evening healing session, R.T. France writes, "The one notable feature here is the mention that, in contrast with the elaborate incantations and techniques used by other exorcists at the time, Jesus drove out demons simply 'with a command,' the same wording which was used by the centurion in verse 8."¹

9. At times, each of us will face situations that loom large and may even appear hopeless. Sometimes we experience a miraculous healing. Other times, things don't seem to turn out the way we had hoped. How have you grappled with this reality in your faith journey?

¹ France, NICNT, 321

10. Think back to the implicit question of the astonished crowds who heard Jesus' teaching: "Who is this?" How do the healings of these verses begin to fill out the answer to that question?

11. How might this exploration of Jesus' power and willingness to unexpectedly make right the broken things in the lives of people serve to strengthen your faith? What seemingly intractable things in your life might you bring to Jesus in a posture of hope and faith?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Take time in prayer to dwell on the character of Jesus as a healer, as the one who will eventually deal with every area of brokenness and evil in the world.

Repent. Bring to Jesus any areas of your life where you struggle to trust him fully.

Request. Pray for more faith! And ask boldly for Jesus' miraculous healing in areas of your life where there is pain, brokenness, illness, emotional anguish. Expand the circle outward to pray for the same things in your homegroup, amongst your friends and family, in the church, in this country, in the world.

Study 12

Matthew 8:18–9:8

Most of us go to great lengths to maintain comfort. And while it's easy to think of everything from our clothing to our bedding, comfort even has a place in the kitchen. What is one comfort food that you enjoy?

Chapter 8 began with a bang, as Jesus –now finished with the Sermon on the Mount– “came down from the mountainside” and began healing the sick. In the stories that follow, we discover that Jesus does not invite his people into a life of cozy ease.

1. Read Matthew 8:18-9:8. As you read, make note of what stands out to you, what prompts questions for you, or what resonates with you.

2. These stories begin with Matthew's somewhat curious note, “When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake” (v. 18). Does this surprise you? What does this comment indicate about Jesus?

In verses 19-22, Jesus responds to requests from a teacher of the law and another disciple in ways that may seem surprising. Commenting on a parallel passage in Luke 9, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Discipleship means adherence to Jesus Christ alone, and immediately.”¹

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Touchstone: New York, NY, 1959, 121)

3. How does your heart react to these reminders of the high cost of following Jesus?

Despite the requests of the men who came to him, Jesus' plan to cross to the other side of the lake is undeterred (vv. 23-27). While en route, a sudden storm imperils the journey. Carson helps paint the picture, writing, "It is well known that violent squalls (the term *seismos* can refer to an earthquake or a sea storm) develop quickly on Lake Galilee (v. 24). The surface is more than six hundred feet below sea level, and the rapidly rising hot air draws from the southeastern tablelands violent winds whose cold air churns up the water."¹

4. What competing assumptions inform the cries of the disciples in verse 25?

5. Imagine yourself on board the boat during this terrifying event. What is Jesus' tone of voice in verse 26? How would you respond to his question if he asked you right now? Be prepared to compare responses with your homegroup.²

In 1st century Palestine, the sea was often considered a place of chaos and even terror. Yet, throughout the Old Testament, God is presented as Lord even over the seas. Read God's description of himself in Job 38:1-11 and Psalm 107:23-32 which seems to poetically describe the exact situation of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee.

¹ D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 215.

² Refer back to Study 8 if you need to refresh your memory about the implications of the phrase, "you of little faith."

6. How might passages such as these informed the disciples' question in verse 27?

Once across the lake, Jesus and the disciples encounter a pair of men afflicted by demonic oppression (vv. 28-37). Though not an obvious feature of day-to-day life in 21st century Santa Barbara, Scripture is clear about the reality and destructive nature of demonic activity. (See, for example, Matthew 17:14-18, 1 Corinthians 10:18-22, 1 Timothy 4:1-2, and 1 John 4:1-3.)

Notice that in this part of the story, Jesus does very little speaking. Instead, it seems that the demons immediately recognize him for who he is and respond appropriately (see James 2:19).

7. How does this whole interaction between Jesus and the demons connect to the story in verses 23-27?

8. What do you imagine drove the response of the townspeople in verse 37?

In the final story in this section (vv. 1-8), Jesus finds himself back in his hometown and presented with yet another opportunity to demonstrate his power, this time in a way that makes the local religious leaders uncomfortable.

9. Contrast Jesus' words to the paralytic in verse 2 with his responses to others in these stories. What do you think caused him to respond so differently here?

Blasphemy was a serious charge, punishable by death (see Leviticus 24:13-16 and John 10:31-33).

10. How does Jesus' response answer the charge made by the religious leaders?

11. Take some time to look back through these stories and make a list of moments of discomfort such as these. Who is uncomfortable and why?

12. What aspects of Jesus' character are particularly meaningful to you when you find yourself in seasons of discomfort?

13. It is appropriate that we come to these texts as we approach Holy Week. How might these reminders of the costliness of faith better prepare you for Good Friday and Easter?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. How does this passage put on display the character of God? Make space in your prayers for wonder and awe as you contemplate his magnitude and power.

Repent. Confess your “little faith” in response to the threats you perceive around you. Ask for forgiveness for any ways in which you have failed to honor and revere God, or in which you have dragged your feet in response to his call to follow him.

Request. Ask for a recharged, re-energized faith in Jesus to emerge in yourself, in our church, and in our community.

Study 13

Matthew 9:9-34

Everyone loves to feel included, especially if the invitation feels exclusive. Whether a backstage pass to hang with the band, an advance copy of the book, or a table at the trendy spot whose reservation list is always full, it can be fun to feel like an insider. Tell about a time when you were a part of something that felt exclusive.

After stunning displays of power and authority, Jesus' star must have been rising. Indeed, we read that the most recent witnesses to his ministry "were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man" (v. 8). Yet, in the stories that follow, rather than limiting who can get beyond the velvet rope, Jesus will show a surprising inclusivity in his ministry.

1. Read Matthew 9:9-34. As you read, be sure to write down any fresh impressions, new discoveries, or lingering questions you may have.

There are few figures in the circles of observant first century Jews who would have been as despised as a tax collector. Employed by Rome and its various underlords throughout the region, tax collectors enforced the economic vision of the occupying force and, typically, made their own living by adding a hefty percentage to the amount of the levy.

And yet, in a stunning turn of events, when he meets Matthew at his "tax collector's booth," Jesus invites Matthew as a disciple. R.T. France helps paint the picture of the shock of such an invitation,

By working for an unpopular government sanctioned by Rome, a [tax collector] incurred the hatred and disdain of Jewish patriots, quite apart from any economic grievances resulting from their reputation for exacting more than was officially necessary. The conventional pairing of 'tax collectors and sinners' shows how society regarded them...For Jesus to call such a

man to follow him was a daring breach of etiquette, a calculated snub to conventional ideas of respectability, which ordinary people no less than Pharisees might be expected to balk at. Fishermen may not have been high in the social scale, but at least they were not automatically morally and religiously suspect; Matthew was.¹

2. With that in mind, how might a faithful Jew have expected an up-and-coming rabbi like Jesus to encounter someone like Matthew?

3. What clues in your study of this gospel so far suggest that Jesus was likely to have a different way with Matthew than the community might have expected? (It may be helpful to review the Sermon on the Mount.)

Apparently, the invitation to Matthew reverberated among his associates, as well, and Jesus finds himself joined at a meal by those who would have been coming from the margins of society. The additional guests were those simply known as “sinners,” a term flexible enough to describe anyone who didn’t meet the exacting religious standards of the Pharisees. This dining arrangement is a situation that the respectable religious leaders found untenable.

4. Look again at the question of the Pharisees in verse 11. Do you imagine it being asked in a spirit of true curiosity? If not, how might it have sounded?

1 France, 351-352

5. In responding to the charge of the Pharisees, Jesus quotes from the prophet Hosea. Read Hosea 6:4-6. How does that context fill out Jesus' words in Matthew verses 12-13 and bring clarity about the "righteous" and "sinners"?

It is important to note that this is not a one-time occurrence after which Jesus "learned his lesson." On the contrary, Jesus so regularly found himself in conflict with the religious leaders over his choice of associates that later he would be labeled—not flatteringly—as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34).

Yet, Jesus' confounding of religious expectation was not limited to who was invited to eat with him. In the next story, his decision to eat at all prompted a similar sense of confusion!

6. What seems to motivate the question asked by John's disciples in verse 14?

7. How does Jesus' response in verse 15 address their question?

Though the connection of verses 16-17 to what has preceded in this chapter may not be immediately clear, Jesus uses the illustrations of a cloth patch and wineskins to point out how his ministry is different from what may have been expected—or even imaginable—with the existing religious system so carefully safeguarded by the Pharisees. In contrast to the narrow circles of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus brings a kingdom of surprising ethics and an unexpectedly wide welcome that includes those from the margins.

8. With that in mind, how does Jesus' message in verses 16-17 relate to what we have already seen in chapter 9?

The following story, in verses 18-26, demonstrates clearly just how different Jesus' ministry truly was from what would have been expected from a first-century rabbi.

9. Using what you know of first-century Israelite society, which aspects of this story would have come as a surprise to those present? If you don't know much, don't worry– you can lean into the knowledge of your fellow homegroup members.
10. What picture of Jesus emerges from these two healings? What pieces of the text inform your response?

As his fame grows, Jesus encounters a pair of men who address him as “Son of David” (v. 27). This is the first time this phrase appears in the gospel of Matthew and, as Carson points out, “there can be no doubt that the blind men were confessing Jesus as Messiah. They may have been physically blind, but they really ‘saw’ better than many others”.¹

¹ Carson, 233

11. In the previous stories of healing, Jesus simply responds to the obvious need or to the specific request before him. Here though, he asks the men a question in verse 28. What might have motivated that question?

On the heels of healing the blind men, Jesus performs yet another exorcism, prompting additional awe on the part of the growing crowd of admirers (v. 33). Yet, not everyone was enamored.

12. Skim back over these stories in verses 9-34 and notice the way that individuals and groups responded to Jesus. What does Matthew hope to show his readers with this portrayal of the Pharisees?
13. How have you, personally, experienced the welcome of Jesus? Does one of these examples of Jesus' inclusivity and mercy resonate with your own story?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Spend some time giving God due praise for his mercy. Be sure to give thanks that he is a God who invites sinners to repentance and inclusion in his family.

Repent. Bring before God any places where your heart attitude reflects that of the Pharisees more than that of Jesus. Confess any slowness to embrace those perceived to be beyond the scope of God's grace.

Request. Ask for eyes to see those on the margins, for a heart of compassion for those still far from God. Plead with the Spirit to move in our church in a way that would result in many finding hope and life in Jesus.

Study 14

Matthew 9:35–10:42

Most of us like to feel as though our lives take place within a broader story. Tell about a time when you were part of something “bigger than yourself.”

When Jesus began calling disciples to himself in chapter 4, he promised, “Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people.” Thus far in Matthew’s gospel, however, Jesus’ followers have stuck pretty close to their rabbi. But, as chapter 9 comes to a close and chapter 10 begins, that is about to change.

1. Read Matthew 9:35-10:42. Some of this covers familiar territory while some material here may seem new or even confusing. As you read, keep a list of the verses in this passage that seem familiar as well as a list of things that seem new to you.

Familiar:

New:

This passage begins in 9:35 with an overview of Jesus’ ongoing itinerant ministry. This one verse aptly summarizes all that has been seen of Jesus’ ministry to this point in Matthew.

2. Though his ministry was widespread and attracted a significant following, Jesus was driven by something other than growing his platform. What clues do you see in verses 35-38 that speak to Jesus’ motivation?

“Compassion” differentiated Jesus not only from the religious leaders of his day—who thus far in Matthew have not exhibited much of that character trait—but also from the less-than-ideal leaders of Israel’s history. In one powerful passage, the prophet Ezekiel highlights the dangers that can befall a people when those who should act as shepherds show little care for the sheep.

3. Read Ezekiel 34:1-16. How does this passage compare or contrast with what is said of Jesus in Matthew 9:36, specifically, and what you have seen in Jesus in Matthew, generally?

4. Jesus’ words in verses 37-38 are typically well known in Christian circles. How does their placement after verses 35-36 help add texture to them?

After instructing the disciples to ask for the Lord to send more workers, Jesus turns around and seems to provide an immediate answer to that request.

5. Take a close look at 10:1 in which Jesus commissions some of his followers to ministry that looks like his. What significant difference does this verse point out between the accounts of Jesus’ ministry and the coming ministry of the disciples? What reminders are there for us as modern-day disciples?

Though Jesus has gained and attracted large crowds during the early days of his ministry, in verses 2-4 we are introduced to the Twelve. Interestingly, verse 2 marks the first and only use of the word “apostles” in Matthew’s gospel. The Greek term meant “envoy” or “messenger.” To be certain, these twelve were being sent out in a particular manner for a particular mission to a particular place.

6. What do you learn about the Apostles’ message and methods from verses 5-8?
7. Jesus’ instructions and warnings in verses 9-42 could seem a little overwhelming. What themes can you identify here?
8. Why might Jesus have instructed the Twelve to go out empty-handed (vv. 9-10)?
9. How would you summarize the landscape that Jesus describes in verses 11-25? Think about what you’ve seen of Jesus’ ministry so far in Matthew. Why might this have been an important word of instruction for the Twelve?

10. Verse 26 begins with Jesus' encouragement to not be afraid. Which aspects of verses 26-33 may have helped to allay the fears of the Twelve as they embarked on this assignment?

11. Suppose someone read verses 32-39 and accused Jesus of being anti-family. How might you respond? What is the central point of those verses?

As we wrap up, let's be honest: Jesus paints a fairly grim picture of what awaits the disciples. Yet, much of what this chapter outlines is not limited to the story of the Apostles making their way throughout Galilee. Wilkins highlights how the story of the sending of the Twelve points to a similar sending of all who follow Jesus. He writes,

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delineated the principles for his followers that are to characterize their lives as 'kingdom-life' disciples in our everyday world. This second discourse, the Mission Discourse, develops what it means to be 'mission-driven disciples.' Jesus' disciples are to go out to share and live the message of the gospel of the kingdom of God to an alien and often hostile world."¹

12. Which aspects of this chapter have you seen play out in your own life or in the lives of other Jesus followers?

13. How can this chapter encourage your faithful discipleship?

¹ Wilkins, NIV App, 399

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Give God praise that he is the source of all authority and that his sovereignty remains unchanged even in a world often marked by hostility to his ways. Praise him for the ways that you have experienced his care (vv. 29-31).

Repent. Confess the times you have chosen comfort over bold discipleship. Name those whose acceptance you are tempted to seek even if it means underplaying your faithfulness to the ways of the kingdom.

Request. Make Jesus' words your own and "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Ask God for the Spirit to move in the people of our church in ways that would pervade our community with the light, hope, and joy of the message of the kingdom of God. Pray for many to experience the freedom found in Christ.

Study 15

Matthew 11:1-24

Assumptions underlie much of the way in which we navigate life. Each day, we have certain expectations about how life will go and, often, when our expectations are not met, we experience dissonance both internally and externally. Tell about a time when you experienced the discomfort of your expectations going unmet.

We last encountered John the Baptist in Matthew's gospel way back in chapter 3. There, he was preaching fiery sermons, calling people to repentance, and demonstrating faithful obedience by baptizing Jesus. In chapter 11, John will once again take a place of prominence in the narrative, yet in very different circumstances than his ministry in the Judean wilderness.

1. Read Matthew 11:1-24 and, as you read, make a note of anything that resonates with you or prompts questions for you.

Verse 2 indicates that John "was in prison." (For background on this turn of events, read Mark 6:17-20.) While incarcerated, John sends his disciples to Jesus with a significant question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" This inquiry may come as a surprise, given that the last time we saw John in this story, he was standing next to Jesus as heaven opened and the voice from heaven validated Jesus' mission and identity (3:16-17).

2. Try to put yourself in John's position. What do you imagine prompted John to ask this question?

3. Have you ever found yourself asking similar questions as a result of challenging circumstances? If so, what were those circumstances and how did Jesus answer your questions?

Though Jesus' response in verses 4-6 may seem cryptic or even evasive to us, for the original hearers of Jesus' words and readers of Matthew's gospel, the answer was a resounding, "Yes, I am the One." In reply to John's question, Jesus draws especially on the prophet Isaiah's description of the promised deliverance at the coming of God and his anointed One. (See, for example, Isaiah 35:3-6 and 61:1.)

4. Re-read verses 7-15. What does Jesus' address to the crowd suggest about his posture toward those who wrestle with doubt and questions?

In these verses, Jesus makes some dramatic claims about John, saying that he was "more than a prophet" who directly fulfilled crucial Old Testament prophecy, that his ministry represents the close of the age of both the Law and the Prophets, and that "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." High praise, indeed!

5. Verse 11 ends with a statement that may seem incongruent with all that has preceded, beginning in verse 7. What is it? How does it strike you?

Joe Kapolyo, writing in the Africa Bible Commentary, offers a helpful illustration for understanding Jesus' message. He writes, "Despite John's greatness, believers are greater than John, for it is as if John stands back, holding open the door so that believers can enter."¹

6. In verse 15, Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." This formula is used often in the Scriptures to call for reflection that leads to response. What response do you imagine Jesus was looking for from the crowd that he was addressing?

Though most Bibles include a new heading between verses 19 and 20, it is perhaps better to think of verses 16-24 as a unit in which Jesus challenges the improper response of those that failed his urging in verse 15.

7. How would you summarize Jesus' message to the crowd in verses 16-19?
8. It seems that spiritual insensitivity—likely born out of improper expectations—lay at the heart of Jesus' rebuke of "this generation." Can you think of a time in your life when God's work didn't match with your expectations? How did your heart navigate that?

¹ Joe Kapolyo, "Matthew" in *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1159.

9. How might we avoid fostering improper expectations of God's work in the world and in our lives?

Jesus continues the theme of spiritual insensitivity in verses 21-24 and offers stinging rebuke by way of very unsavory comparison. Tyre and Sidon, two large cities in the nearby region of Phoenicia, were associated with false worship and opposition to God (see, for example, Isaiah 23 and Ezekiel 28). Sodom is recognizable as a city that embodied hostility toward God's people and God's ways (see Genesis 19) and received comprehensive judgment.

France provides additional insight, saying, "The comparison with Sodom is therefore even more wounding than that with Tyre and Sidon, since at least the Phoenician cities, though captured by Alexander the Great, were still standing, whereas Sodom was the classic example of total destruction, its remains now buried under the waters of the Dead Sea."¹

10. What imagery comes to mind when you read of "sackcloth and ashes"? (If you need help investigating this idea, read Jonah 3:5-9.)

11. What shocking point is Jesus making with these comparisons?

¹ France, NICNT, 439

12. Let's try to synthesize these 24 verses. What seems to be Jesus' main concern both in his response to John and in his address to the crowd?
13. How does this passage encourage your faith? How does it challenge you in your discipleship? Be prepared to share these thoughts with your homegroup.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Give praise to God for the ways that the gospel brings freedom, wholeness, and restoration to individual lives and to the world. Thank him for faithful servants who have held out the message of the gospel in ways that have allowed our hearts to hear and respond.

Repent. Name and confess any untruths you have entertained about God based on the circumstances of life. It might be helpful to use this framework: "God, I confess that because of _____ I have lived as though you are _____ though I know you are actually _____."

Request. Ask for tender hearts within our church family and our friends and neighbors that would respond appropriately to the movement of God in our midst. Ask for increasing awareness of the spiritual realities of life and for the courage to respond.

Study 16

Matthew 11:25–12:14

We live in a world often marked by harried schedules and overly ambitious to-do lists where we operate on the razor's edge of our human limitations. Reflect on your own life stage. What feels restful to you right now?

Throughout the last number of chapters we have seen over and over again that Jesus presents something different than the religious rhythms of the day. In this week's passage, that theme will continue to build.

1. Read Matthew 11:15-12:14. As you do, be sure to write down any questions that arise for you, verses that stand out uniquely for you, or new insights you may gain.

Key themes of these verses are Jesus' self understanding and his relationship with the Father.

2. What do you learn about Jesus' view of God in these verses? What do you learn about Jesus' view of himself and his relationship to God?
3. Which of Jesus' descriptors of God resonate with your perception? Which ones challenge you?

This section opens with a prayer in which Jesus offers gratitude to the Father. Yet, the reason for Jesus' spirit of thankfulness might be surprising. It sounds as though Jesus is praising God for being opaque in his dealings with people.

4. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. How does Paul's thinking there help illuminate Jesus' spirit of gratitude in Matthew 11:27-28?

5. It's also important to see how verses 25-26 relate to what immediately preceded. How does this section build on 11:16-24? (If you need help remembering, consult last week's study.)

To be sure, Jesus does not teach here that one must be simple and uneducated to come to him in faith. Rather, he insists that all who come to him must come with a childlike posture. Morris explains,

In every age there have been wise and clever people who have rejoiced in the revelation Jesus has made known. But the point is that they came to know it by their simple trust in Jesus, not by their intellectual skills and their knowledge of abstruse research methods. And that simple trust is open to the humblest of us all.¹

Scan back over our passage and notice the three sections of teaching here. In the second of the three teaching sections, verse 27, Jesus insists that, despite the skepticism and growing hostility of the Jewish religious leaders, his teaching and work maintained continuity with all that had already been revealed from heaven.

6. How does this section relate to the broader context of this passage?

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 293.

After his assertion about his connection to the Father, Jesus gives one of the most well-known invitations in the gospels in 11:28-30.

7. What assumptions inform Jesus' offer in these verses?

Green reminds us that "The yoke was the wooden collar that ran across the shoulders of a pair of oxen and enabled them jointly to pull enormous weights. Metaphorically, the yoke was used to describe the law which the Jewish youth undertook to bind to himself in the bar mitzvah ceremony. It spoke of loyal commitment."¹

8. With that additional context, what is Jesus offering in these verses that is distinct from what was on offer from the existing religious leaders?

9. How have you experienced Jesus' easy yoke and offer of rest?

Immediately on the heels of this refreshing invitation, Jesus and his disciples find themselves on the wrong side of the religious leaders, this time over a midday snack. Seeing that the disciples "began to pick some heads of grain and eat them," the Pharisees call out the lawbreaking that Jesus seems content to overlook. Strictly speaking, the Pharisees were not wrong in their interpretation—even if they chose the least compassionate understanding of Scripture, it was still a legitimate way to understand the Law.

10. Notice that Jesus doesn't quibble over the Law with Pharisees. What is the point that he makes in verses 3-7?

¹ Green, BST, 143.

11. Jesus uses the Scriptures to call out these self-assured religious leaders. What warning might we glean from this interaction about our own approaches to the Bible?

The final story of this week's passage takes place in a synagogue on what seems to be the same Sabbath day. Perhaps reeling from their previous interaction, the Pharisees are "looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus." This time, rather than a grain field, "a man with a shriveled hand" presents an opportunity for the religious leaders to test Jesus' faithfulness to the Law.

12. Though the question of verse 10 could have been answered with a simple "Yes" or "No," Jesus chooses a different approach. How do Jesus' words serve to respond to their question?

13. How do the stories in 12:1-13 serve to illustrate the main point of 11:28-30?

14. Spend some time looking back over 11:1-12:14. How do the Sabbath stories of 12:1-14 relate to Jesus' words in chapter 11?

15. What encouragement or challenge for your faith is in the passages you've considered this week?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for the ways that you have already experienced his offer of rest. Thank him for being “for” his creation in ways that bring freedom and flourishing.

Repent. Confess any tendencies you find in your own heart toward the kind of legalism that characterized the religious leaders of Jesus’ day.

Request. Plead with God for many to know him through the Son and for the people of our church to be messengers of a kingdom marked by rest, wholeness, peace, and freedom.

Study 17

Matthew 12:15-50

From the beginning of his gospel, Matthew set out to show that Jesus provoked differing reactions in people. From the time of his infancy, Jesus was seen as a threat by some. Like Herod, Jesus' opponents would inevitably work for his demise. Last week, we left off at Matthew 12:14 which underlines this truth: "...the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him."

On the other hand, some recognized Jesus to be the one long-prophesied, the one who speaks the wisdom of God, the one who does the work of God, the one who ultimately embodies the reign of God.

In this week's passage, we will see Jesus pressing this distinction and allowing no one the choice of neutrality.

1. Can you think of other examples of situations in which you cannot remain neutral?

2. A decision must be made about Jesus of Nazareth. With this in mind, read Matthew 12. Make note of what stands out to you or is confusing.

Consider verses 15-21. Jesus' ministry does not need publicity. He decided at the beginning of his ministry that he would not go that route (remember the second temptation in Matthew 4:5ff?). We also saw that the Father's words to Jesus at his baptism were an echo of Isaiah 42:1. Here Matthew quotes this passage plainly.

2. Why do you think this passage is so important to how Matthew understands the person and work of Jesus? What is it about the prophecy of the coming Servant that resonates so deeply with what Matthew wants all his readers to see in Jesus?

In verses 22-32, we read of a dispute between Jesus and his adversaries about the nature of his power. The dispute comes in response to Jesus' powerful exorcism and healing of the blind mute man. The crowds are amazed and wonder if this is an indication that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

3. Summarize the rationale of the Pharisees, and Jesus' response. What are the arguments they put forward about what this miracle means? What holes does he point to in their thinking?

Pharisees:

Jesus:

In verse 30, Jesus says plainly, "Whoever is not with me is against me." Some may recall that Jesus also said to his disciples, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). How do we understand these two sayings that seem to say opposite things? Michael Green is helpful:

This latter saying restrained disciples from rejecting one who drove out demons in the name of Jesus but was not of their particular circle. The verse here in Matthew 12 challenges readers as to whether they are scattering with Satan or gathering with Christ. As so often in this gospel, we are presented with a straight choice: no middle ground. 'He who is not with me is against me' is, accordingly, a test we should apply to ourselves. Where do I stand with regard to Jesus? But 'whoever is not against us is for us' is a test we should apply to others, rather than glibly write off those whose theology or practice differs from our own.¹

4. How do these sayings apply to how you think about yourself and others?

The warning in verses 31-32 has often left readers worried about what it means to commit 'the unforgivable sin.' But N.T. Wright clarifies,

If you are worried about committing this sin, it's a good sign that you haven't! Still it remains serious in terms of the decision we reach about Jesus. He warns against looking at the work of the Spirit and declaring that it must be the devil's doing. If you do that, it's not just that you *won't* be forgiven; you *can't* be forgiven, because you have cut off the very channel along which forgiveness would come. Once you declare that the only remaining bottle of water is poisoned, you condemn yourself to dying of thirst.²

1 Green, 150

2 Wright, 56

5. Look at these verses again in the context of verses 22-32. How would you encourage a friend who is anxious about committing a sin that is unforgivable?

In verses 33-37, Jesus stresses that our words and actions are reflective of what is in our heart– in other words, of who we really are at the core.

6. Read Proverbs 4:23. Consider memorizing it and reciting it for your homegroup. More importantly, think about its practical meaning for you. What does it mean to “keep or guard your heart with all vigilance”?

In verse 38, the scribes and Pharisees have the audacity to ask Jesus for a sign to verify that he really is doing the work of God (even though they just saw him heal a blind and mute demon-possessed man!).

7. What is the “sign of Jonah” that Jesus refers to? How will this sign validate his ministry and who he is?

Notice that in this chapter, Jesus made three claims that in his ministry *something greater* has come.

- Greater than the temple where the priests serve (v. 6)
- Greater than Jonah the prophet (v. 41)
- Greater than Solomon the king (v. 42)

Do you see the cumulative effect of these claims?

Matthew 12 points to the fact that Jesus' person, proclamation, and inauguration of the kingdom [is] greater than, and therefore the fulfillment of, the three great institutions in Israel—priest, prophet, king. Jesus' arrival with the kingdom of God has exceeded all that Israel has witnessed in her history. But tragically, and ironically, the Gentiles see what the Pharisees and that fateful generation do not.¹

8. How does Jesus fulfill each of these three roles? Summarize briefly how Jesus has become our great prophet, priest and king.²

Prophet:

Priest:

King:

In verses 43-45, Jesus gives a little illustration about a demon who leaves a person and comes back with a vengeance (and lots of friends).

9. What does it say about our best efforts to 'clean up our act' and get our lives in order? What is the point of this illustration?

As the chapter concludes, we see that family connections are as insufficient as religious affiliation to fall back on. Even his mother and brothers must decide who they believe Jesus is and whether they will follow him in doing God's will.

10. Think back on all we've considered in this study. What's one thing you were encouraged by and one thing you were challenged by?

1 Wilkins, 452

2 If you are unsure, go online and read Question/Answer 31 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* for help.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Thank God for the gift of his Son, the one who is greater than any priest, prophet or king that foreshadowed his coming!

- Praise Jesus for his great sacrifice and intercession on our behalf, for revealing to us the words of God, and for his kind authority.
- Thank the Lord Jesus for the most definitive sign we could ever want—the cross and empty tomb—that gives us confidence that truly God was in Him, reconciling the world to himself.

Repent. Confess to the Lord any area of your life that is not in alignment with the desires and purposes of Christ. Recommit your whole self to his leading again.

Request. Think of areas in the world where Satan's power is at work—deceiving and dividing people and keeping them in bondage. Ask Jesus to bind Satan from continuing his destructive work in these areas.

- Pray for the members of your homegroup that their “house” would be filled with the presence and power of God.

Study 18

Matthew 13:1-23

Before we take a break from our study of Matthew for the summer, we get to look at chapter 13 which contains seven parables that serve to communicate truths about the kingdom of heaven. We are just going to give our attention to the first and most famous of these seven this week, and will consider the rest in the fall.

We are now about halfway through the gospel and this chapter represents something of a pivot point in Jesus' ministry. Take a moment to go back to the "Pattern of Matthew's Gospel" at the beginning of this study guide (p. 10) and see where this third of five blocks of Jesus' teaching in Matthew falls in the scope of the whole book.

Chapter 13 is the hinge on which the whole gospel turns. At the end of this chapter we read: 'only in his hometown... is a prophet without honor' and Jesus sets forth from Galilee towards Jerusalem and his death. And so there is something powerful and evocative at the end of the first half of the book, something that summarizes both the self-disclosure and the opposition we have met hitherto, and that echoes the great themes of who Jesus is, what he can do, and the need to respond to him.¹

1. With this in mind, read Matthew 13:1-23. Make note of what stands out to you or is confusing.

Read over this short, eight-verse parable again.

2. As best you can, try to write the point of this parable in one sentence. Compare your summary with others in your homegroup.

¹ Green, 155

3. Now think about the four different kinds of soils and the effect on the seed. Chart out below the different kinds of soil, the different results, and the interpretation that Jesus gives in verses 18-23.

Type of soil				
Result on the seed				
Jesus' interpretation				

After concluding the parable, Jesus gives a word of exhortation to the crowd.

When Jesus said "If you've got ears, then listen!" (v. 9) it should alert us to the fact that he meant "I know this isn't obvious; You're going to have to think about it!" Jesus wanted them to struggle with what he was saying, to talk about it amongst themselves, to think it through.¹

4. Think about your own hearing and reading of God's word. Do you expect easy answers or are you ready to work to understand what is not immediately clear? What questions have you grappled with as you seek to understand and be shaped by God's word?

¹ Wright, 59

Not only does understanding the parables take work, so does understanding Jesus' explanation of the purpose of his telling parables! Look at verses 10-17 again. Does it sound like Jesus is trying to hide the truth from people so they won't understand and be saved? What is going on here?!

On the one hand, clearly it cannot be the case that God does not want people to turn to him. 1 Timothy 2:3-4 tells us that "God our Savior... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Indeed, he sent his Son to reveal and save, not to confuse and condemn.

Michael Green explains the quotation from Isaiah:

[It] does not mean that Jesus does not want people to turn to him and be healed. It is the cry of frustrated love and longing on his part. He quotes, with heavy irony, the condemnation Isaiah had issued to the people of his day. The parable was meant to challenge people to think again. It was meant to be a mirror in which they could see what they really looked like. It was intended to draw the hearers to decision, and to give them room to do so— precisely like the incarnation itself.¹

On the other hand, we can see here both the doctrine of God's sovereignty and the notion of personal responsibility. Leon Morris speaks to how this is evident in verses 11-12: "It is not a merit in the disciples that they understand where others do not; their comprehension is due to the fact that God has chosen them and given them the gift of understanding." And yet, having "drawn attention to the importance of God's gifts of grace,... he now emphasizes the importance of human responsibility. When anyone uses the spiritual truth he has, that truth grows. More is added to it. By contrast, if he does not use it he finds that it vanishes away little by little."²

5. These are deep waters! Having read these verses and some scholars' attempts to help clarify, try to summarize what you think Jesus was saying about his purpose in using parables. (Don't be discouraged if you find this difficult!)

After telling the parable of the sower and responding to the disciples' question about his use of parables, Jesus gives the meaning to the disciples who believe in him and are eager to understand more. Consider this parable's meaning for your life.

6. Which of the four reactions to the Word of God most closely resembles where you are right now?

1 Green, 154

2 Morris, 339-40

7. Think about the three kinds of unproductive soil. What might each kind of soil look like in someone's life today? And if you find that your heart is hardening, your enthusiasm for the gospel is waning, or the worries of this life are crowding out your prioritization of God's kingdom, what can be done, if anything?

	What does it look like?	What can be done?
Hard ground		
Rocky ground		
Thorny ground		

8. What can we learn about sharing our faith from this passage? What should we expect as a result of sharing the gospel with others?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Read 2 Corinthians 4:4-6. Thank God for making known to you “the glory of God displayed in the face of Christ.”

Repent. Confess any areas of your life in which you have been careless or neglectful when it comes to cultivating the soil of your faith.

Request. Ask the Lord to let light shine in the darkness of the hearts of your unbelieving friends and family. Ask God to make the ground of their hearts soft and receptive to the message of Jesus. Pray for those who are suffering for their faith. Ask God to sustain their faith in the midst of opposition. Ask for great fruit to come from their testimony to Christ in the face of persecution. Pray that the cares of life and the riches of the world would not make us unfruitful. Ask God to make our church generous with both our spiritual blessings and our material ones.

