

JESUS

the one we've waited for

the gospel of
Matthew

Chapters 13-18 | Fall 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 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 sections 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

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 19

Matthew 13:24-52

Welcome back to the Book of Matthew!

At SB Community Church, we have been taking a deep dive into this marvelous book since January. After a break during the summer to explore some other topics, we are back to Matthew! Some of us have been along for the journey and others are just joining in, so let's take some time to review where we have been for the past 13 chapters.¹

1. On your own and then with your homegroup, try to sketch out the general cast of characters. Flip back through Matthew to refresh your memory. What individual people have been part of the story? What groups of people?

2. What have been some of the main events of this unfolding story?

3. Read through Matthew 13:24-52 (you may want to start in verse 1 for more context). Write down any notes or questions below.

¹ A great free resource if you want to explore further into a variety of topics and passages in Matthew is this 35-part podcast series on Matthew from the Bible Project. <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/series/matthew-marathon/>

You may remember from the last session that the book of Matthew contains five sections of “discourse;” in other words, Jesus’ longer sermons or discussions.¹ Chapter 13 contains the third discourse, parables about the Kingdom of God. The last time we were in Matthew, we studied the first of these parables in Matthew 13:1-23, and here we continue right on with another story about seeds and crops.

Let’s orient ourselves by looking back to where we left off in Matthew back in May. Mike Willbanks provided a great orientation to this section of Matthew in his sermon from 5/29/2022.² As he reminded us,

If Matthew’s gospel was a play, we’d almost be at intermission. Chapter 13 is the direct centerpoint, and chapter 14 launches part 2. And so Matthew is strategically weaving together this gospel, and at the very center, in chapter 13, he gives us seven parables about the kingdom of heaven. And in these parables he’s bringing everything he’s talked about so far and pointing forward to what is still to come in part 2 of Matthew’s gospel.

4. Take a look at the parable of the wheat and weeds (verses 24-30) and its explanation (verses 36-42). How does Jesus identify the following:
 - The Sower
 - The Enemy
 - The Good Seed
 - The Weeds
 - The Harvest
 - The Harvesters
 - The Fire and the Barn

5. What is Jesus trying to teach us about the kingdom of heaven? What does it teach us about what we should expect in this age and the next?

¹ The five discourses can be found in Matthew 5-7, 10, 13, 18, and 23.

² <https://youtu.be/yWdbyJfYbfl> or find it in any podcast store under Santa Barbara Community Church (May 29 episode, “Jesus the Storyteller”)

6. How does the theme of waiting play out in the parables of verses 24-43?

7. Read the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast (verses 31-35). Based on these two similes, what do you think Jesus is saying about the Kingdom of God and the effect it has on the world? Do these two parables make the same point or does each make a different contribution to our understanding of God's kingdom?

8. Read the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl (verses 44-46). One story tells of a person who finds a treasure by accident; the other is about someone who was searching intently for it. Which story describes your discovery of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and his kingdom? Did you stumble upon it or search intently for it? Be ready to share with your homegroup.

9. A central part of these two stories is the element of joyful sacrifice. What sacrifices have you joyfully made for the sake of following Jesus?

10. Finally, take a good look at the parable of the fishing net (verses 47-52). What similarities and differences do you see within this passage and the parable of the wheat and weeds? What is the main point of this parable?
11. Reflect on this whole section of discourse and all that the parables are saying. Based on these sketches, what can we discern about the kingdom of heaven? And further, **why** do you think it's important to Jesus that we understand all of this? In other words, what difference would it make in our lives if we lived according to these realities?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for the mysterious reality of the Kingdom of Heaven that is here among us! Thank God for his mercy and patience, and also for his justice that will eventually deal with evil once and for all.

Repent. Repent of the times we've refused to listen or have refused to acknowledge the work of God. Ask God to forgive us for the ways in which we have not valued the Kingdom of Heaven above all else.

Request.

- Pray for ears to hear and a heart that is eager to understand God's ways!
- Pray for our church family, that we would be a people who align our hearts and lives with God's Kingdom and who continually embody the beauty and power of the Kingdom to the community around us.

Study 20

Matthew 13:53-14:12

All of our lives are filled with highs and lows. Some highs are really high, and some are really low! In the space below, starting at the dot representing your birth, draw a curvy line to illustrate the highs and lows of your life over time. Label at least three significant highs (graduations, new job, new relationship, etc.) and three significant lows (deaths, rejections, failures, etc.)

Birth**Now**

Following on the heels of last week's passage which features a large block of Jesus' stories and teaching, our passage this week continues the narrative of Jesus' ministry with two notable events—and rejection is a common thread. People's failure to recognize the Kingdom of God is going to lead to some dark outcomes.

Commentators and alert readers have noticed that Matthew seems to be demonstrating how the truths of Chapter 13's parables play out in the events that follow. According to Bruner, in the passages we will study this week and next week,

[W]e see five different receptions of God's Word. In a sense, the quality of the receptions escalates. In the first two stories, which can be understood together, Jesus and John are rejected, illustrating the truth of the first soil in the Parable of the sower. In the next pair of stories, the disciples and Peter both believe and yet do not believe—illustrating the truth of the distracted, divided, or choked middle soils. And finally, the pagan people of Gennesaret—of all people!— receive the coming of Jesus enthusiastically and wholeheartedly and so are healed, illustrating the truth of the fourth soil.¹

Keep this framework in mind as you read on through chapter 14!

1. Read Matthew 13:53-14:12 and take note of any details that jump out at you.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, 2 volumes. Baker, 1987, 519

Focus on 13:53-58 to begin with. Especially for any of us who have been following Jesus for a while, it's good to remind ourselves of the earth-shaking nature of the gospel. It's not a matter of self-help or tips for a better life, but a reality that has the power to turn our lives upside down—and not everyone wants to sign up for that! N.T. Wright draws our attention to the placement of this story to emphasize this truth:

Matthew places this incident right after the long series of Jesus' parables of the kingdom, and it's a stark warning to anyone who might suppose that Jesus' teaching was meant to be a matter of simple and straightforward lessons about life, morality, spirituality or whatever, that anyone with half a brain would pick up easily. Far from it. This 'teaching,' if we want to call it that, is shocking, explosive and dangerous.¹

2. Do you agree with this assessment? Verse 57 states that the people in Jesus' hometown were "deeply offended" by him. What is potentially offensive about Jesus' message, and who is most likely to take offense?

There is an ongoing theme in Matthew about Jesus being rejected by his own people, those who should have been the first to recognize him for who he was. This story about his hometown fits right into that theme.

3. Name a few other examples of this theme from previous passages of Matthew. What are some of the barriers that keep people from acknowledging the truth about Jesus?
4. Reflect on verses 57 and 58 and the unbelieving responses of the Nazarenes. How does a person's will factor into belief? In other words, to what extent do you think people choose what to believe and what not to believe? Compare thoughts with your homegroup.

1 N.T. Wright, Part 1, 179

5. Read verse 58 again. Matthew seems to link Jesus' unwillingness to do miraculous works with the hardness of the hearts—what do you make of this?
6. Try to imagine being one of Jesus' close neighbors, responding to his teaching with put-downs and sarcasm. Can you recall a situation where you may have been rolling your eyes while God was trying to do something important? Explain.

The next episode in our passage (14:1-12) is a flashback that serves as another illustration of a prophet being rejected. This time the prophet is John the Baptist, and it's a bizarre and sad story.

7. What character issues prompted Herod to make the decisions that led to John's death?
8. Think about this story from the perspective of John himself. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to decide whether to speak a hard truth to someone who had power to retaliate? Share with your homegroup about how you came to that decision and what the consequences were.

The story of John's demise, placed as it is within the narrative, sends a clear message. As N.T. Wright says, "Matthew has put down a marker, a signpost, halfway through his gospel: if this happened to the prophet who went on ahead, this is what will happen to the one who follows."¹

9. What do you think Jesus' disciples thought when they heard about what happened?

No one who has read the Bible comes away with a naive, unrealistically optimistic view of life. No where does God promise a life with one high point after another for those who follow him. Rather, we find in the gospel all that we need to endure with hope and courage and faith that God is bigger than our trials and he is with us in our lowest lows. Let this lead you to worship and prayer.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Thank God for believers you know of, in history or in our times, who have demonstrated courageous faith. Praise God that even when we experience rejection in the world, Jesus will not reject us (John 6:37).

Repent. Think about Jesus' close neighbors and their derisive comments. Name any situations where you may have treated others with contempt and scoffing, and ask for Jesus to forgive you. Consider the character issues that led Herod down such a terrible path. Is there anything there that feels uncomfortably familiar? Repent as God prompts you.

Request.

- Ask for keen discernment to be able to see where God is doing something, and for the grace to welcome his agenda instead of your own.
- Pray for believers who are undergoing persecution as a result of speaking truth to power.
- Pray for a faith that is courageous even in the face of hostility.
- As always, pray for a tender heart toward God and an eagerness to respond to his leading.

¹ N.T. Wright, Part 1, 183

Study 21

Matthew 14:13-36

This week's passage contains three "episodes." Read through all three for an overview, and later we'll go back and spend more time in each episode. What are your initial observations on what's happening here?

1. Notice that twice in this passage, Jesus goes off to spend time alone (v. 13 and v. 23). Why do you think he does this? Do you think this is in response to something that happened before, or in anticipation of something to come, or both?
2. If you have familiarity with the Old Testament, does this story call to mind another situation of food being provided miraculously? How might that story help us to understand this story?
3. Reflect on this episode from the perspective of the disciples. Why do you think Jesus said, "YOU give them something to eat?" What do you think they were thinking and feeling as they carried out Jesus' instructions?

N.T. Wright's powerful commentary on verses 15-21 is worth quoting at length. Read this aloud with your homegroup and reflect on it together.

Being close to Jesus has turned into the thought of service; Jesus takes the thought, turns it inside out (making it more costly, of course), and gives it back to you as a challenge. In puzzled response to the challenge, you offer what you've got, knowing it's quite inadequate (but again costly); and the same thing happens. He takes it, blesses it, and breaks it (there's the cost, yet again), and gives it to you—and your job now is to give it to everybody else.

This is how it works whenever someone is close enough to Jesus to catch a glimpse of what he's doing and how they could help. We blunder in with our ideas. We offer, uncomprehending, what little we have. Jesus takes ideas, loaves and fishes, money, a sense of humour, time, energy, talents, love, artistic gifts, skill with words, quickness of eye or fingers, whatever we have to offer. He holds them before his father with prayer and blessing. Then, breaking them so they are ready for use, he gives them back to us to give to those who need them.

And now they are both ours and not ours. They are both what we had in mind and not what we had in mind. Something greater and different, more powerful and mysterious, yet also our own. It is part of genuine Christian service, at whatever level, that we look on in amazement to see what God has done with the bits and pieces we dug out of our meager resources to offer to him."¹

4. Where have you seen this pattern at work in your own story?

5. In light of the quote above, how would you finish the sentence, "But I have only..."? (see vs. 17)

Beginning in verse 22, we move from the episode of the astonishing picnic to an equally compelling sequel. To begin with, after what must have been an exhausting day, Jesus sends his friends back home and disperses the crowds. What does he do next? Take a close look at verses 22-33.

¹ Wright, Part 1, 187

6. What do you think was going on in Jesus' spirit during his time of solitude in verses 22-24? Imagine what this time with his Father might have been like.

7. Look at v. 24-33. Outline the full range of what you think Peter's emotions must have been as this story unfolds.

Richard Peace highlights the way this story gives us a lens to interpret patterns in our own life of faith. "In simple terms," he writes, "this is the Christian walk: the stress of life, the fear of many things, the courage that comes in the discovery of Jesus, the faith in Jesus that leads us to step out in new ways, the doubts that assail us as we move forward, the fear that returns, the need to reach out again to Jesus, and the worship when we discover anew his sustaining power—all this in a matter of a lifetime!"¹

8. What stressors and fears are you facing at this point in your life? What are the practical ways you can reach out to Jesus in the midst of these?

9. Re-read verses 34-36, our third episode for this week. In your own words, how do the people of Gennesaret respond to Jesus? If the stories of chapter 14 can be seen as illustrations of the parable of the sower and the soil from 13:3-9, what kind of "soil" can be found here?

¹ Peace, 92

10. Where might God be speaking to you in these three stories? What has stuck with you the most? Commit to praying about this in the days to come.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for his commitment to be close to us through everything we experience in this life. Thank him for the miraculous ways in which he provides for us, even when it's not always the provision we expected. Rejoice in a God who knows intimately what we need—nourishment, comfort, healing. Thank him for the ways in which he knows us and tends to us.

Repent. Repent of any hesitancy that you are aware of in your own heart—reluctance to offer yourself fully to Jesus, reluctance to trust.

Request.

- Ask God for a renewed commitment to seeking him in prayer, as Jesus did!
- Ask for greater faith, especially when things are hard and scary.
- Ask for God to make it clear where and how he wants you to offer your gifts for his service, and to multiply whatever you have to offer him!

Study 22

Matthew 15:1-28

In the World War II film *Saving Private Ryan*, a cadre of soldiers sets out on a mission to find and retrieve Private Ryan (played by Matt Damon), whose brothers have been killed in the war. The mission to preserve this soldier's life proves to be a costly one. Near the end of the film, Captain Miller (played by Tom Hanks), the lead officer on the mission, is about to die. His challenge to Private Ryan: "Earn this."

If you've seen the movie, you'll probably remember the powerful next scene. Decades later, Private James Ryan— now an old man— has returned to Normandy and is standing before Captain Miller's gravestone and pleads with his wife, "Tell me I'm a good man."

It's this quest to be approved that lies behind this week's passage in Matthew. As you read this section, ask yourself what are the differences in how Jesus and his opponents understand 'goodness' and defilement. And how can we be assured that we will be accepted by God?

Read Matthew 15:1-28. As always, jot down some notes about what you find interesting, perplexing, or important.

The interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees in verses 1-9 hinges on the authority of 'the tradition of the elders.' Leon Morris explains what this 'tradition' was:

The tradition of the elders arose because pious Jews were very careful about keeping the law. They saw the law as God's greatest gift to the human race and regarded it as a wonderful privilege that the Jews, the people of God, had received it. They considered it important that they should treasure the law and practice its every provision. So they studied it with diligence... they were anxious not to break any of its provisions, and this led to a mass of definition and interpretation.¹

1 Morris, 388

1. Treasuring God's word and being obedient to it are good things! How does Jesus' response to the Pharisees and scribes indicate where they went wrong?

Jesus provides an example of how human traditions were elevated above the authority of God's word. Though the fifth of the Ten Commandments teaches us to 'Honor your father and mother,' the practice of *corban*— or devoting property or finances to the temple— allowed Jews to give an equivalent amount to what they might have spent on their parents and be released from any further obligation. In this way, a devout Jew might honor a religious vow and not be required to honor parents by providing for their needs as God had intended.

2. How might people today (perhaps even we ourselves) shirk the responsibility to love others as God commands us to in the name of religious devotion?

We see in these verses what great esteem Jesus had for the word of God and his concern that God's word be honored above any other authority. The Navigators use the illustration below to show different ways we can 'get a grip' on the Bible.¹ Read the verses beside the various methods.



¹ Sometimes the word "Apply" or "Obey" is in the center of the palm.

3. How are you being shaped by God's word? Share with your homegroup your current practices of getting God's word into your heart and mind, and/or how you'd like to be encouraged in these areas.

In verses 7-9, once again we see Jesus appealing to the prophetic words of Isaiah to describe the hypocrisy of his contemporaries. In stark terms, Jesus is accusing his accusers of a way of thinking and living that has led them into false worship ("in vain do you worship me").

4. What do you think of when you hear the word 'worship'? How does that compare to what Jesus thinks is important in true worship?

In verses 10-20, Jesus goes on to show that the Pharisees' attempts to be 'good men' were entirely off base. As Michael Green puts it, "inner purity, not external rectitude, is what delights the heart of God." But this alone doesn't quite capture the sting of Jesus' words. His point is not only that inner defilement is worse than ceremonial impurity.

The implication is that the spiritual heart is naturally evil and needs the righteousness that Jesus has initiated with the arrival of the kingdom of God...That righteousness is an inside-out transformation that begins with the heart and works throughout the process of the disciple's life to produce external righteousness while pursuing the perfection of the Father.¹

In other words, the message of Jesus is not, "Earn it," but rather, "Receive it." But first we need to admit we need it.

¹ Wilkins, 538

5. If the real problem is not 'out there' but inside us, what steps are you currently taking to guard your heart from the sin that defiles and open your heart to the kind of transforming work God wants to do in you?

The last section of our text is about a woman who seems a perfect model of one who is ready, responsive, and eager to receive from Jesus. Unlike the open hostility of the Pharisees, this woman shows amazing faith. But shockingly, Jesus seems in no hurry to show her mercy! The attitude of the disciples only adds to the awkwardness of this story.

7. Does this trouble you? Why do you think Jesus first appears to ignore her, then almost to insult her? And what about her response leads him to praise and reward her?

8. Have you ever felt ignored or worse when you've cried out to God in need? What counsel or encouragement would you give to someone in a situation like this based on what you know of God's character, either from this passage or elsewhere in the Bible?

Even though she didn't immediately receive what she asked for, this woman was tenacious!

9. Read Luke 18:1-8. Do you have any experience with this kind of persistent prayer? If not, what is it that keeps you from it?

This story of the woman who comes to Jesus with nothing but need and faith ought to lead us to praise and thanksgiving for a Savior so great and merciful! Spend some time as a homegroup doing just that.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Spend some time praising God that we don't need to earn his love! Thank him for knowing our hearts and pursuing us still.

Repent. Consider the ways the Christian church has followed the lead of our Jewish forebears, creating excuses for not obeying God while trying to maintain our own righteousness. Ask God for mercy and a new commitment to his word.

Request.

- Ask that God would grant us the tenacity of the Canaanite woman, that we might not give up praying and seeking what only he can give us.
- Pray that our worship would not be a sham of religiosity but would be the kind that pleases God. Use William Temple's following description of real worship to help you pray for SBCC. Pray that this would be true of what we offer to God:
"To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, and to devote the will to the purpose of God."

Study 23

Matthew 15:29-16:12

In last week's study, we saw the hostility of the Jews (the 'insiders') contrasted with the faith of the Canaanite woman (the classic 'outsider'). This week the order is reversed but we'll see the same contrast between the reception of Jesus by the outsiders (15:29-39) and the insiders (16:1-12).

1. Can you think of a situation or place where you felt like an outsider? What made you feel that way and what was it like?

Don't skip a thoughtful reading of the text before moving on to the questions below! Read Matthew 15:29-16:12 and make note of what is confusing, what is interesting, what stands out to you.

2. Think back on what we've studied in Matthew so far. Why is it known as having a distinctly Jewish flavor? (If you can't remember, compare notes with your group members.)

Two weeks ago, we looked at the miraculous feeding of the 5000. Some readers have proposed that the feeding of the 4,000 in this text is just a duplicate account of the same event. But Michael Green notes some important differences ending with this observation:

The most significant thing is that the five thousand were Jews and the four thousand were not. This is hinted at strongly in Matthew's account: *they praised the God of Israel*; but it is explicit in Mark's account, which Matthew both followed and assumed throughout this section. The

feeding of the four thousand took place, Mark tells us, in Decapolis, that is to say, a group of 10 independently governed Greek cities in Transjordan. And the wonderful thing about this miracle is that Jesus is making available to non-Jews the same blessings as he had offered to Jews.¹

Many have noted the progression in Matthew's gospel from its emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus the Messiah and his mission to the people of Israel to its final command to 'Go and make disciples of all nations [all Gentiles!].' But the seeds of this are contained in the Old Testament itself. Look up the following verses.

Genesis 12:1-3

Psalms 67

Psalms 87

Isaiah 49:5-6

3. How might you explain God's decision to choose one nation (Israel) if his ultimate objective is to bring salvation to the whole world?

Verse 32 highlights, again, the compassion of Jesus. J.C. Ryle noted that of all the feelings experienced by our Lord while he was on earth, none is mentioned as often as compassion.

4. If God's purpose for us is to conform us into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), we ought to be growing in our compassion for others. In what scenarios is it easy for you to be compassionate? In what ways can we cooperate with God and cultivate increasingly compassionate hearts in other areas of our lives as well?

¹ Green, 174

After the dramatic feeding of the crowds, Jesus and his disciples headed back to Jewish territory and were immediately confronted again with opposition. 16:1 tells us that the Pharisees and Sadducees came together to test him. These two Jewish groups had little in common except their hostility to Jesus.¹

N.T. Wright notes,

[Jesus] would not perform signs to order, as though he had to pass some kind of test. To do so would be to treat God himself as a kind of circus performer. Of course, Jesus was doing all sorts of signs; the gospel story is full of them. And he longed for people to be able to read the signs of the times: to see the gathering storm clouds in Israel's national life, to recognize the way in which corrupt leaders, false teachers, and people bent on violence were leading the nation toward inevitable disaster, from which only repentance and a fresh trust in God's Kingdom could save them. The irony was that they were asking him for a sign, but they were blind to the many signs all around them.²

The one sign Jesus promises them is the 'sign of Jonah.' This should sound familiar since we saw this in Matthew 12:38-41 as well.

5. What (or who) is the sign of Jonah and what does this sign signify? In other words, what will those who see the sign learn from it? (If you are unfamiliar with the story of Jonah, it doesn't take long to read. The book of Jonah is near the end of the Old Testament and just four short chapters.)

The final verses in this section, 16:5-12, revolve around a humorous misunderstanding. As often happens, the disciples are pictured not as heroic figures but as those bumbling at every turn as they seek to follow Jesus.

6. Does it bother you or comfort you that those who followed Jesus so closely were regularly tripping over his teaching and struggling to grasp his meaning? Explain.

1 The Sadducees represented the Establishment. They were powerful and corrupt, willing to compromise with secular power to keep their position of prominence. They controlled the Temple and the priesthood and had grown theologically liberal. They denied many supernatural aspects of the faith and only acknowledged the authority of the first five books of the Old Testament. Phariseeism, on the other hand, was a theologically conservative movement. They were laymen whose devotion to God was marked by the zealous pursuit of moral purity.

2 Wright, Part 1, 2-3

Jesus patiently reminds the disciples that being without bread should not cause them anxiety. After all, they've witnessed (twice!) his ability to abundantly provide in that department.

7. In what ways has God shown himself able to meet your past needs? Share a story of God's goodness to you as a way of encouraging each other to trust in his ability to provide.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Remembering that none of us come to God with anything that puts him under obligation, praise him for being a God who brings those who are 'far off' near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13). Thank him for his compassion and kindness and for his faithful provision of our needs.

Repent. Confess our quickness to forget, or at times even our determinedness to ignore, the ultimate sign of God's goodness— the crucified and risen Christ. Repent from any insistence that God prove his goodness in other ways.

Request.

- As we consider the compassion of Jesus that led to his healing and provision for the crowds, pray for those in your homegroup and others close to you in need of healing and provision.
- Pray for those outside the faith, that God's mercy would lead them to 'praise the God of Israel.'
- Pray for our leaders, that they would not grow callous to the presence and leading of Jesus, but would be responsive to the Holy Spirit as they seek to lead the church.

Study 24

Matthew 16:13-28

Do you know who these people are: Chaim Witz, Stefani Germanotta, Eric Bishop, Caryn Johnson, Terry Bollea? Chances are, you do, even if you don't know you do.¹

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Since the opening words of Matthew's gospel, the identity of Jesus has been a central concern. But most recognize that the events in this passage represent a significant turning point in the gospel. From this point on, Jesus begins to be more explicit about what it means that he is the Messiah— that it will mean a cross and an empty tomb.

Read these 16 verses in a few different translations if you're able. Use the space below to write down initial thoughts and observations.

The events described in this section take place in Caesarea Philippi, a town 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee named in honor of the Roman emperor.² It was a place where pagan worship thrived, including the worship of Caesar and the Greek god, Pan.

1. Jesus asked his disciples "Who do people say I am?" Conduct an experiment this week. Ask a few of your friends, neighbors, co-workers what they think of Jesus. Record their answers below. (And be ready to share your answer with them if they ask your opinion!)

1 The stage names of these individuals are Gene Simmons (of the band KISS), Lady Gaga, Jamie Foxx, Whoopi Goldberg, and Hulk Hogan.

2 "Philippi" refers to Philip the Tetrarch who established the city as his administrative capital and dedicated it to Augustus Caesar. The label also distinguished this Caesarea from another city of the same name on the Mediterranean coast.

The disciples respond that most people were of the impression that Jesus was one of the prophets—that is one of those who functioned as a mouthpiece for God, courageously speaking truth to power. But Peter, speaking on behalf of the 12 disciples, shows that they understand him to be more than that. N.T. Wright gets to the point: “What Peter and the others were saying was: Jesus was the true king! That meant that Herod— and even faraway Caesar— had better look out.”¹

Of course, as the dialogue continues, Peter shows that he didn’t fully comprehend what that meant. He, like all of us, was a work in progress.

2. Think over your own life. Who do you say Jesus is now and how has your understanding of who Jesus is developed over time? Were there any specific moments of growing clarity?

Look again at Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession in verse 17 along with the following verses.

1 Corinthians 2:14

1 Corinthians 12:3

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

3. Why are some able to recognize the truth about Jesus and some are not? How does this make you feel?

Look at verse 18. What did Jesus mean? Leon Morris wisely comments:

“On this rock I will build my church” is a saying that has caused endless controversy in the church’s history. The big question is the meaning of this rock. Does it mean the man Peter? Or the faith Peter has just professed? Or is it the teaching of Jesus (as in 7:24)? Or Jesus himself? Each of the views has been argued passionately by some exegetes, often maintaining at the same time that other views can be espoused only by people who refuse to accept the plain meaning of the Greek. Clearly this is a place where we must tread carefully and keep in mind the possibility of interpreting the passage in ways other than the one that appeals to us.²

1 Wright, Part 1, 7

2 Morris, 422

4. Which of these possibilities makes the most sense to you? Why?

In any case, it is clear that Jesus came not just to save individuals or to set an example, but to build his church.

5. Clearly, the church is important to Jesus. How important to you is the Christian community? In what ways has the church been a blessing or a struggle for you?

Verse 19 is a promise to the church. Compare this verse to the words of Jesus in John 20:21-23. How are we to understand the “keys”? Michael Green explains:

The power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven...means that Peter, along with the other disciples, can make access to the kingdom of God available or unavailable through their witness and preaching... If people respond to the conditions of the gospel, and repent and believe, then they can be confidently assured that God has indeed forgiven them. Jesus made that very plain. If they refuse those conditions, their sins are emphatically not forgiven by God. Jesus made that very plain too. And of course we find the apostles doing just that in Acts. They confidently announce divine pardon to all penitent believers on the day of Pentecost and thereafter. They clearly remind Simon Magus that he is still in the prison of sin and has not yet met the Liberator. His sins are not forgiven.¹

6. Do you think of yourself as having ‘the keys of the kingdom’ in this sense? What are the implications of being given such a privilege and weighty responsibility?

¹ Green, 180-181

Peter rebukes Jesus (!) and receives a strong rebuke in return.

7. Look back at Matthew 4:1-10. Why is Jesus so emphatic in his rebuke of Peter? What connection do you see between the work of Satan in chapter 4 and the perspective of Peter here?

The death of Jesus did not come as an accident. He came to die. And in verse 24, he makes it clear that if we want to follow him, we will need to die as well.

8. What does the call to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and lose your life (verses 24-26) mean to you? Try to be specific about what this looks like day to day.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for shining light into our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. Rejoice in our king who in love chose the agony of the cross above personal comfort and privilege. Give thanks that because the church belongs to Christ, we can have confidence that the church will never die out.

Repent. Acknowledge honestly the ways in which you are still tempted to live for yourself and how unnatural the way of the cross is to us. Ask forgiveness on behalf of the church for how we have sought to domesticate Jesus, toning down his challenging words while seeking comfort in his promises.

Request.

- Ask that God would open the eyes of those who have yet to see the glory of Christ.
- Pray for the life and health and witness of the Church at large and SBCC in particular.
- And pray for each other in your homegroup, that each would daily die to self so that we can find abundant life in Jesus.

Study 25

Matthew 17:1-13

Have you ever discovered a delightful secret about someone you thought you already knew pretty well? If so, what was it? Be prepared to share with your homegroup.

Though the disciples have been following Jesus for some time, they certainly don't yet know all there is to know about their Teacher and Lord. In this study, we will consider a key moment in Matthew's gospel, one in which a few of Jesus' closest disciples get to see something that leads to even greater understanding of who Jesus is.

Read Matthew 17:1-13 and, as you do, make a note of anything that stands out to you, that you find confusing, or that you want to be sure to bring up with your homegroup.

1. This story is loaded with allusions and references to the story of the people of God in the Old Testament. What do you know of the Old Testament that might shed light on the significance of the setting of this story as mentioned in verse 1?

2. Look up the following passages and make a note of any themes that emerge.

Exodus 34:29-30

Numbers 6:22-27

Isaiah 60:19-20

7. Can you think of a time when the circumstances of life have caused you to question the Lord's work or direction? When you look back on that time, how have you come to think about what God was up to?

8. What do you make of the disciples' response to the voice from heaven in verse 6? What does Jesus' response to them in verse 7 reveal about his character?

The final section of this story details Jesus' conversation with Peter, James, and John on the way down the mountain. Having just seen something of the Messiah's glory, they are now ushered back into the real world, a place where not everything makes sense.

9. For most of us, something as dramatic as the revelation on the mountaintop would be a ready conversation piece. Why do you think that Jesus commands the disciples to remain silent about what they've seen?

10. Jesus' cryptic conversation with the three disciples is informed by the prophecy recorded in Malachi 4:1-6. What aspects of your life with Jesus so far have turned out differently from what you'd anticipated?

11. To be certain, this day on the mountaintop had a dramatic effect on the three disciples who accompanied their Lord. Read 2 Peter 1:16-18. How does the Transfiguration seem to have impacted Peter?

12. Though we may not have experiences as dramatic as the disciples did that day, our salvation is no less miraculous. We believe because God has called us and made Jesus known to us. How did you first come to see the majesty of Jesus? How has your life been shaped by that awareness?

The same Lord whose majesty was on display for Peter, James, and John is the One we approach in prayer, we encounter in the Scriptures, we celebrate in worship, we remember at the Lord's Supper, and we claim as the head of the church. Let us delight in him this week!

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for making himself known in Jesus (see Colossians 1:15-20). Praise him for calling people to himself even when they follow half-heartedly and imperfectly.

Repent. Confess the ways in which you have fallen short of God's command to listen to his Son. Name the ways that your discipleship has stopped short of the awe experienced in verse 6.

Request. Ask the Holy Spirit to play his promised role of making Jesus' glory more evident in your life (see John 16:13-14) so that you may know our Lord better and follow him more faithfully.

Study 26

Matthew 17:14-27

1. Can you think of a time when you experienced significant anticipation? What was the cause of that for you?

The magnificent events that open chapter 17 create a heightened sense of expectancy for readers. What could be next? Anything seems within reach for Jesus the beloved and radiant Son of heaven who has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. The surprising trajectory of the glorious identity revealed on the mountaintop will come into greater focus and clarity in the stories that complete the chapter.

Read Matthew 17:14-27 and, as you do, write down anything that you find noteworthy, unclear, or surprising.

2. Jesus' power is sought out by a very desperate father. Have you ever found yourself in a situation that felt similarly desperate? If so, how was your response like or different from that of the man in verses 14-16?

3. Jesus' response in verse 17 reads rather harsh, but is drawn from Old Testament warnings against faithlessness and unfaithfulness. Read the following passages and make note of how the people of God are described in each.

Deuteronomy 32:19-22

Jeremiah 7:21-29

Hosea 4:1-3

4. How do these pictures of Israel's unfaithfulness inform the exasperation evident in Jesus in Matthew 17?
5. Put yourself in the shoes of the disciples in this story. How are you feeling in verse 16? Verse 17? Verse 20?
6. Some read verse 20 as a guarantee of a victorious life in which anyone with enough faith will receive anything they can dream of. What other elements of the passage challenge this interpretation?
7. What is Jesus' main point in verse 20 and how does this response relate to the broader story of verses 14-22?

The same Jesus who drove out a demon with a word and who miraculously used a fish as a vehicle for paying a tax is the Jesus we follow and worship today! May we never lose our awe at our Lord!

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Offer praise that Jesus, the true Son of the true King, came to demonstrate the power of God as well as the character of God. Praise God for the ways that his power continues to bring deliverance and healing into our broken world.

Repent. Like the disciples, we are all susceptible to a lack of faith in the face of trials. Name any ways in which you have seen this tendency in yourself. Confess any instances or examples of not walking in Jesus' example by insisting on your own rights even at the cost of offense to those you are called to love and serve.

Request. Pray that Jesus' words and example would more deeply sink into your heart and into your life so that you might know him more fully. Pray for faith to believe in and live in light of God's promises and power even in the midst of difficult seasons or trials.

Study 27

Matthew 18:1-14

The acronym GOAT stands for Greatest Of All Time and has been applied to any number of figures from athletics to the arts. Simple question for you: who is the GOAT in the following categories? Be prepared to share (and defend!) your answers with your homegroup.

Musician or band:

Basketball player:

Business leader:

Chef:

Movie:

When making our assessments about greatness, each of us draws on our own set of typically subjective criteria. In today's passage, Jesus is presented with a question about greatness and makes his criteria clear, though his standard likely surprised his listeners and may still come as a surprise today.

Read Matthew 18:1-14 and make a note of anything that stands out to you, that prompts questions for you, or that you want to bring up with your homegroup.

1. Try to put yourself in the scene as one of the disciples approaching Jesus. What are you feeling as you come to him in verse 1?
2. It's important to remember that the original manuscripts of the Bible didn't have chapter and verse divisions, meaning that one story flowed into the next. With that in mind, go back and re-read 17:22-23 then re-read 18:1. What strikes you about the proximity of these two stories?

Jesus' response would likely have shocked his original audience who had a different estimation of the value and place of children than does our 21st century American society. Wilkins highlights the surprise,

In the ancient world, children were valued primarily for the benefit they brought to the family by enhancing the workforce, adding to the defensive power, and guaranteeing the future glory of the house. But they had no rights or significance apart from their future value to the family and were powerless in society.¹

3. Knowing this, how does Jesus' reply in verses 3-4 serve as a challenge to the disciples?

4. Clearly, Jesus' posture toward children was different from that of the broader society. What are some characteristics of children that Jesus holds up for us to emulate?

Jesus turns a corner in verse 7 from things that would threaten the faith of children to the general ruin caused by sin and the fate of those who promote and encourage sin.

5. Verses 8-9 echo Jesus' previous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Go back and read Matthew 5:29-30. Jesus' previous discussion of these themes came in a context about adultery and lust. How does his use of this imagery in Matthew 18 impact your understanding of his meaning?

Despite using the phrase "these little ones," Jesus continues his discussion of general discipleship in verse 10. Drawing on his earlier insistence about the posture needed for greatness in the kingdom, Jesus now refers to all those who follow him as "these little ones."

¹ Wilkins, NIV App, 612-613

6. What does his use of this phrase communicate about Jesus' view of those who follow him?

After the command not to look down on “these little ones,” Jesus adds in a challenging piece of information about angels in heaven. Throughout Christian history, various attempts have been made to decipher what Jesus says here. Some have suggested that Jesus is referencing so-called “guardian angels” who have charge of specific individuals, while still others have suggested that he refers only to the general role of angels in the protection and preservation of the church.

While Scripture does describe varying ways that angels relate to nations, churches, or even individuals (see, for example: Genesis 48:15-16; Daniel 12:1; Acts 12:13-15; and Revelation 1:19-20), there is limited evidence in the Bible for the idea that each individual has a specific angel whose divine task is to protect their assigned mortal.

7. Considering the context as a whole, what might Jesus have intended by including this reference to angelic care?
8. How do verses 12-14 serve to put a fine point on the argument that Jesus is making throughout this passage?
9. Let's move from the historical context and original meaning to our own lives. How has your journey of faith in Jesus reframed the idea of greatness for you?

10. Jesus calls his people to a posture of vulnerability and then promises divine help and protection for those who respond to that call. How have you experienced God's divine care in your life?

A conversation that began with a prideful desire to be named the "greatest" goes on to highlight the surprising traits of vulnerability and compassion for the lost. These very traits were on clearest display in Jesus, the one who took on the humble posture of a servant to pursue wayward image bearers like us. Jesus truly is the answer to the disciples' question in verse 1!

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise the Lord for the humility seen in Jesus that has allowed us to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Praise God for his pursuing heart that brings lost and wandering souls home to his family.

Repent. Confess any ways in which your heart is hesitant to embrace child-like vulnerability in your life with God. Confess any shortcomings of the Christian church that have served to cause people to sin and made encountering the true and living God more difficult.

Request. Ask God for greater courage to travel the path of vulnerable and humble discipleship as well as a greater awareness of his provision for that journey. Ask the Holy Spirit to create a hunger in you similar to that of the Father's to see wandering people be rescued by the pursuing grace of God. Ask him to give you opportunities to play a role in that rescue for those you know and love.

Study 28

Matthew 18:15-35

We've all seen conflict handled poorly at one time or another, but what about the opposite? When have you seen conflict handled well? What was the end result?

In a fallen world, conflict is unavoidable. Yet, as we all know, the context for our conflicts matters. In this week's passage, Jesus will directly address the issue of conflict and equip his followers with an approach and an attitude that reflects their reality.

Read Matthew 18:15-35 and make a note of anything that you find surprising, noteworthy, or confusing.

1. Jesus assumes that conflict will find its way into the life of his followers and in verse 15 he provides an important relational context for the discussion that follows. What metaphor does he employ to describe the relationship between disciples? How often does it come up in this week's passage?

2. What seems to be the ultimate aim of what Jesus describes in verses 15-17?

3. Consider verse 17. What would it mean to treat someone as “a pagan or tax collector”? Think about how Jesus treated Gentiles and sinners, and bear in mind that Matthew himself was a tax collector when he first encountered Jesus. In light of all this, what do you think Jesus is commanding here?
4. How does Jesus’ approach to conflict resolution within the family of God line up with or differ from approaches to conflict in other arenas of your life?

Verses 18-20 can seem to come out of nowhere, but the theme remains adjudicating disputes in the family of God. In verse 18, Jesus uses similar phrasing to what he told Peter in 16:19, yet with the important difference that the Greek terms here are in the plural, thereby extending what seemed unique to Peter in chapter 16 to the entire community in chapter 18.

The language of “binding and loosing” has often been misinterpreted, but seems best understood as a reference to the regulation of conduct within the Christian community.

5. If verse 18 speaks to the weighty topic of deciding about what conduct is permissible and what is impermissible within the Christian community, what might be the intended purpose of Jesus’ promises in verses 19-20?

Conflict resolution and navigation is hard work and even the most ardent followers of Jesus may find themselves susceptible to compassion fatigue. It’s not hard to imagine the wheels in Peter’s head spinning as he listened to Jesus describe a thorough process of restoration and forgiveness.

6. What attitudes and assumptions about forgiveness are revealed by Peter’s question in verse 21?

N.T. Wright points out the humorous-if-it-wasn't-so-convicting upshot of the exchange that precedes Jesus' parable. He writes,

Peter's question and Jesus' answer say it all (verses 21-22). If you're still counting how many times you've forgiven someone, you're not really forgiving them at all, but simply postponing revenge. "Seventy times seven" is a typical bit of Jesus' teasing. What he means, of course, is "don't even think about counting; just do it."¹

7. How does the story that Jesus tells in verses 23-34 further motivate forgiveness for the people of God?

8. Jesus concludes this story with a dire warning in verse 35. How, if at all, does this picture of God match up with what you have been taught about him?

9. Jesus' repeated use of family language in this passage ought to catch our attention. How have you experienced the Church—whether SBCC or otherwise—as family? What has this required of you? How has this benefitted you?

10. The author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to portray Jesus as the faithful brother of all those who come to God in faith. Read Hebrews 2:10-18 and make a note of what that passage has to say about how Jesus blesses and serves his siblings.

1 N.T. Wright, Part 2, 40

11. How might you more fully live as a sibling within the family of God this week? What would prevent you from doing so?

Jesus' ministry not only ushered in new ethical standards for the people of God, but also a new way of conceiving of the way that disciples live together as family. May we all press on toward becoming a true family together!

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise the Lord that he has called us to himself and placed us in a new family. Praise him for caring enough about the church that he has provided wisdom and instruction for our life together. Praise him for his lavish forgiveness that goes well beyond "seventy times seven."

Repent. Name any conflict that you have allowed to foster division rather than prompt reconciliation. Confess any ways that you have withheld forgiveness for a brother or sister in Christ.

Request. Pray that the Spirit would give you a renewed sense of familial affection for your spiritual siblings, whether you find yourself in seasons marked by joyful camaraderie or tension and conflict. Pray that, in all seasons, God's promises and provision would sustain your faithful witness and faithful worship.