

JESUS

the one we've waited for

the gospel of
Matthew
Chapters 19-28 | Winter-Spring 2023



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.
- 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 Rhonda DuPar at (805) 895-4274 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

Children's Ministries Pastoral Assistant
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Sources and References

- Bruce** F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983
- Carson** D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8. Zondervan, 1984.
- France** R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New International Commentary on the New Testament), Eerdmans, 2007.
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- Morris** Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Eerdmans, 1992.
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- Wright** Nicholas Thomas Wright, "Matthew for Everyone, Part 2" (*The New Testament for Everyone*). London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The First Gospel

As this new year begins, we once again return 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 chapter 13, seven woes in chapter 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 29

Matthew 19:1-12

In chapter 19, we reach a new section in Matthew's gospel. (See the chart at the beginning of this study to see where this fits into the whole of Matthew.) The time in Galilee is over. Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem begins. On the way, he has some consequential interactions that point again to what life is meant to look like in the community of his followers.

Read these 12 verses slowly and thoughtfully. What do you notice in particular? What questions does it raise? Jot down any initial observations.

Before going on in the study, we should acknowledge the obvious. There are few, if any, of us who have not been touched, and hurt, by divorce in some way. If you feel comfortable, share with your group about your experience of divorce. Perhaps you walked with a good friend through a divorce. Maybe it was your parents. Or you might have experienced the pain of divorce yourself. Sharing these things is not meant to shame anyone and you can choose not to share. But the sharing of the pain just might help our conversations be less theoretical and more sensitive to the deep pain that can be brought to the surface when we talk about a passage like this.

In verse 3, we read that the Pharisees came to test (or tempt) Jesus. What follows is an attempt to trap him.

1. How might it matter that the response we have from Jesus was in reply to enemies who intended to trap him and not from a divorced person or couple in a challenging marriage?

It's important to recognize that divorce was a hot and controversial subject then as it is now. There were various rabbinic schools that weighed in on what the law of Moses meant. The two main schools were the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel. Shammai was the more conservative group that took a very restrictive view to marriage— that divorce was only appropriate when there had been sexual immorality. Hillel was the more liberal group that advocated that divorce was permissible for 'any cause.'

Jesus is being asked to wade into the middle of this controversy.

But notice how Jesus responds: he doesn't quote any of the rabbis, but he quotes two verses from Genesis.

2. What does each contribute to the conversation and our understanding of marriage?
 - Genesis 1:27

 - Genesis 2:24

The Pharisees counter with another question in verse 7, pitting Moses against Moses (both Genesis and Deuteronomy are from the 'Book of Moses.'). Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in a couple different translations.

3. Why would Moses 'command' giving a certificate of divorce if it was never God's intent? Jesus responds that it was 'because of your hardness of heart.' What is the point he's making in his response (verse 8)?

4. Why is it significant that Jesus appeals to the way things were at the beginning?

In verse 9, Jesus seems to point out a scenario in which divorce might be considered by his disciples—sexual immorality. The Greek word for this is *porneia*. Notice, this word doesn't mean simply 'adultery' but is a broader term for sexual infidelity.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

5. Is Paul disagreeing with Jesus about acceptable reasons for Jesus' followers to get a divorce? How would you explain the discrepancy? Does this open the door wider for other valid reasons for divorce?

Michael Green concludes,

It is not possible for the ethics of the kingdom to be articulated in anything less than ideal terms. And yet the Lord is consistently compassionate to those who fail, repent, and come back to him for restoration...Legalistic rigorism is as inappropriate for the Christian community as is casual divorce.

And Michael Wilkins writes,

Divorce is not the unpardonable sin, but we tend to go to extremes with those who have unbiblically divorced and remarried. We either relegate them to an outcast status with permanent stigma, or else we glibly act as if it had never happened. The themes of repentance, forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation that marked Jesus' community prescription in chapter 18 must guide our thinking in all of these situations.

6. Respond to the two quotes above. Do you agree with their conclusions? Why or why not?

Whatever your impression is of Jesus' words in verse 9, it is clear that the disciples are shocked at the way Jesus has talked about divorce and remarriage.

7. Do you think of Jesus' words about marriage and divorce as unrealistic? What would you say to a cynic that hears these words of Jesus and thinks that he's set too high a bar for us who live in the 21st century?

Jesus' final words in this section make it clear that marriage is not for everyone— certainly not for all of his disciples. Eunuchs were palace servants who were castrated so that they could serve the royal family without concern that they would father children with the royal women. They stand for all, therefore, who could not or would not be married. Singleness is a perfectly valid position for some citizens of God's kingdom.

8. How do his words in verses 11-12 give an encouragement or challenge to the unmarried among us? How do these verses challenge us as a church community?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for the gift of marriage and how it points to the covenant relationship between Christ and his church. (Ephesians 5:21-33). And thank God for how the pattern of marriage points to God's love and faithfulness.

Repent. Ask God's forgiveness for the casual way our world, and sometimes even the church, treats marriage and divorce. Repent for the way those who have gone through the trauma of divorce have sometimes been treated as uniquely bad sinners.

Request.

- Pray for the health of marriages in your homegroup and in our church. Pray that those whose marriages are difficult will be well loved and supported.
- Pray for those who are single among us. Pray that we would be a church where they are enfolded into families and are equipped to serve in significant ways.
- Pray that marriage would be honored by all and that the marriage bed be kept pure. (Hebrews 13:4)

Study 30

Matthew 19:13-30

Happiness ain't a thing in itself – it's only a contrast with something that ain't pleasant.

Mark Twain

In his characteristically witty way, Twain is making the point that we often come to know things better by examining them in relationship to their opposite. In today's text, Jesus continues to teach his disciples about what it means to live in the kingdom of God with two opposite object lessons.

Read this week's passage and reflect on ways that the children brought to Jesus are a contrasting image of the rich young man. How do they represent two contrasting ways of relating to God?

Children

Rich young man

Now pay attention to anything else that grabbed your attention in these verses. Anything else you find interesting, curious, confusing? Make note of it before going on.

The Greek word for children (*paidia*) being brought to Jesus refers to very young children, infants to toddlers. Michael Green writes,

Children matter, and have much to teach us. They are usually more sensitive to the things of God than adults are. Their attitudes of trust, simplicity, inability to put forward their own achievements, and dependence, all characterized true disciples. Those qualities are priceless in the kingdom of God, and therefore children can provide a signpost toward life in the kingdom style.¹

¹ Green, 206

1. Consider the following areas of your life. Next to each, describe how you would think and feel about each if you are exhibiting the child-like attitudes mentioned above.
 - Money

 - Work

 - Reputation

 - Family

 - Relationship with God

2. Since Jesus held and loved and welcomed children, how guilty should you feel if you don't serve in Children's Ministries every chance you get?¹

3. Look at the initial question of the rich young man and the response of Jesus in verses 16-17. What do they reveal about how each views human nature and God?

There was another time when someone asked Jesus a very similar question to this one. Read John 6:28-29 and compare his answer there to his answer here.

4. What do you make of the two apparently different answers? Is Jesus contradicting himself?

¹ Geesh, relax... just kidding! (kind of)

5. Consider the episode of verses 16-26 as a whole. What emotions do you think each was feeling during this encounter... When the rich man arrives on the scene? ...When he walks away?
- The rich young man
 - The disciples
 - Jesus

Jesus' words about riches being an obstacle to entering the kingdom of heaven are startling– both for his first disciples and for us. Again, listen to Michael Green's commentary on verses 23-26:

[I]t is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven. It can't be done. And why not? Because money tends to make us selfish, materialistic, independent of God and of our fellows, and distracted with methods of retaining our wealth. Wealth leads to an overconfidence which is the very antithesis of the childlike spirit of trusting dependence on the goodness and mercy of God. It is perfectly evident. It had just happened in front of their eyes, in the person of the rich young man. Wealth was something Jesus set his own face against. Christians who have great possessions are in great peril.¹

6. Read the following verses and reflect on your own relationship with wealth. What factors and experiences in your life have shaped your view of money and possessions?
- Ecclesiastes 5:10
 - Matthew 6:24
 - 1 Timothy 6:9-10
 - Hebrews 13:5
7. How are you guarding against wealth's dangers and what are you doing to make sure you are not a slave to wealth production or wealth protection?

¹ Green, 209

While the love of money is something every Christian should guard against, the idol of wealth may not have the same power in all our lives. Nevertheless, there is a lesson here for all of us. Consider the words of New Testament scholar John Broadus:

The test of this is different for different people. Some find it harder to renounce hopes of worldly honor and fame for Christ's sake, than to renounce wealth; and for others the hard trial is to abandon certain gratifications of the various appetites or of taste. Abraham left his native country at God's command, but became rich and famous. Moses gave up the distinction and refined pleasures of court life, and tried patiently to rule a debased and intractable people. Elisha left his property at the call of God through Elijah. Paul abandoned his ambitious hope of being a great rabbi. All should be willing to die for Christ (16:24ff.), though not many are actually required to do so.¹

8. What might Jesus be calling you to lay down to follow him? What specific idols/temptations might God be calling you to renounce as you seek to follow Christ with your whole heart?

Verses 28-30 are challenging to interpret, but the thrust of so much of Jesus' teaching is that his kingdom is an upside-kingdom. Those who are scorned now (like Jesus himself and his disciples) will be honored later. Those who seem powerless now will be given authority later.

9. How might these words cause you to reevaluate your present life conditions, hardships, goals, etc. in light of eternal realities?

¹ John Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 1990, 407, cited in Boice, vol. 2, 409- 410

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Thank God for welcoming those who have nothing to offer him. Praise God that he is a God of blessing– that he wants our best and that he is not stingy. Rejoice that what is impossible for humans is possible for God! (verse 26) Praise the Lord for being a God who saves.

Repent. Whether for yourself personally, or on behalf of the church at large, repent of ways the church has mirrored the world in its idolatry of wealth, power, and worldly influence. Confess anything that can be an obstacle to fully surrendering your heart to Jesus.

Request.

- Pray for children and young people to come to Jesus. Pray for SBCC's children and youth ministry. Pray for Child Evangelism Fellowship and many other mission and ministry partners seeking to bring young people to Jesus.
- Pray that the people of SBCC would be willing to lay down anything Jesus asks us to follow him.
- Pray for a spirit of joyful generosity among God's people.

Study 31

Matthew 20:1-28

Think back to your first jobs. What kind of work did you do? How much did you get paid? When you meet with your homegroup, start with the youngest person and work your way up to the oldest members, sharing what job you had and how much you got paid.

In Romans 4, Paul draws the distinction between what someone is owed and what someone receives as a gift. The Message puts it like this:

*If you're a hard worker and do a good job, you deserve your pay; we don't call your wages a gift. But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it's something only **God** can do, and you trust him to do it—you could never do it for yourself no matter how hard and long you worked—well, that trusting-him-to-do-it is what gets you set right with God, by God. Sheer gift.*

Romans 4:4-5

Understanding this distinction is crucial to understanding how we relate to God. Today's passage emphasizes this truth.

Read Matthew 20:1-28. Make some notes about what you find surprising, important, or confusing in the space below.

1. What is your initial emotional reaction to the parable of the vineyard (verses 1-16)? Who do you sympathize with in the conflict between the owner and the workers and why?

A story about a vineyard would be evocative for the Jews who heard it. The people of Israel are compared to a vineyard in the Old Testament, and of course, God is the owner of the vineyard.

2. What are three words you would use to describe the owner (God) in this story?

In chapter 13, we read seven parables, each of which highlighted a particular truth about 'the kingdom of heaven' (that is, the nature of God's rule/reign). Here we have another of these parables. Remember that parables are not meant to be pressed to try to teach more than they set out to. They are meant to teach one main point.

N.T. Wright articulates what he sees as the main point of this parable:

God's grace, in short, is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. It isn't the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. The point of the story is that what people get from having served God and his Kingdom is not, actually, a wage at all. It's not, strictly, a reward for work done. God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes covenants, in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return. When he keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his overflowing generous nature.¹

Yes, God's grace scandalizes those who think God owes them, but it amazes and humbles those who know they don't deserve it.

3. How have you struggled with imagining that God owes you something more, or experienced being humbled and amazed by God's grace?

Since our passage this week begins in chapter 20, you may have forgotten how chapter 19 ends. Compare 19:30 with 20:16.

4. What significance do you think there is in the fact that the parable is book-ended by such similar words? How do they connect to the message of the parable?

¹ Wright, 57

In verses 17-19, we have yet another prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection. Notice how as he gets closer to the moment, his predictions become more detailed and clearer. (Compare with 16:21, 17:22-23.)

5. Why do you think Jesus needed to keep repeating these predictions of his death?

What happens next would be funny if it wasn't so dishearteningly obtuse. Imagine! Jesus has told them a parable about the grace of God that makes the last first. He has prophesied again his own terrible suffering and execution. And two of his disciples get their mom to try to secure themselves positions of prominence! Not only that, but the other disciples are filled with jealousy when they see what's going down.

What Jesus goes on to tell his disciples in verses 25-27 is a template for leadership and the use of authority in his kingdom.

6. How do the following verses expound on Jesus' description of leadership and authority in his kingdom?
 - Philippians 2:3-8
 - 1 Peter 5:1-3

Michael Green writes, "In the upside-down Kingdom, greatness is measured in terms of service, and that is a severe judgment from Jesus on the estimations of greatness both outside the church and, regrettably, in it."¹

7. Where do you have opportunity to express Jesus' style of greatness, serving others? Who are you seeking to serve with whatever influence and authority you have and how are you seeking to do so?

¹ Green, 216

Verse 28 is one of the most wonderful verses in Scripture and one of the plainest descriptions of what Jesus came to do. His death was to be “a ransom for many.” A **ransom** is a payment that sets free. It was the **redemption** price for liberating captives or slaves.

7. Ponder this wonderful image further by reflecting on the following verses:
 - Ephesians 1:7
 - 1 Peter 1:18-19
 - Revelation 5:9-12

8. What captivity has the blood of Jesus redeemed you *from*? What has it freed you *for*?

9. In what ways does your life (actions, activities, thoughts, expenditures, etc.) reflect your redemption? What spiritual or behavioral disciplines can you practice to remember Jesus’ ransom payment?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise the Lord that he “does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10), but generously gives us much more than we deserve. Worship God for sending his Son to pay our ransom and set us free from slavery to sin!

Repent. Confess any unworthy thoughts of God. Repent of ways we have treated him like a boss who owes us our wages rather than a Father who wants our best.

Request.

- Pray that the message of God’s extravagant grace would be clearly communicated in every area of ministry at SBCC. Pray that our kids, youth, college students, women and men of all ages, would hear and understand the scandalous grace of God.
- Pray for SBCC’s leaders. Pray that they would lead with Jesus’ mindset of sacrificial service rather than self-promotion. Ask that this same attitude would be reflected in all our hearts.

Study 32

Matthew 20:29- 21:27

Suppose you found out you had one week left to live. How would you spend the next seven days? Who would you want to spend your time with and what would you like to do? Write down some thoughts below and share your answer with your homegroup.

As we come to this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has one more week to live. He knows what is coming- he's been predicting it over and over. Despite the suffering that lies ahead, he has been intent on going to Jerusalem where torture and death await him. But there is still much more he intends to do and teach first.

There's so much packed into our passage this week! Read it through slowly, perhaps in a couple translations. As you read, outline the different sections and record some initial thoughts and questions about what you observe.

1. Skim through each of the four gospels and find the Triumphal Entry story. How much of each gospel (everything after this episode) is devoted to the last week of Jesus' life? What significance do you see in this?

Our narrative begins in 20:29 with Jesus and his disciples beginning to make their way to Jerusalem from Jericho, a 17-mile walk during which they would ascend 3,000 feet. Quite a hike! But before they get far at all, they encounter two blind men. These blind men seem to be quite a contrast to the spiritual blindness of the disciples in the previous episode that we looked at last week (20:20-28).

2. In what ways are these blind men models for all of us who come to Jesus?

Among other things, these men recognize that Jesus is “the Son of David” – a title that points to Jesus as the Davidic messiah, something Matthew has been keen to show us since the very beginning of his gospel. With the start of chapter 21, we see the Son of David finally arriving in the City of David, Jerusalem. The king has come to his capital!

This story loses much of its punch if you don’t know the story of Judas Maccabeus, a Jewish hero from about 200 years before Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. In the 2nd century BC, Jerusalem had fallen under the rule of the Greeks. Their king, Antiochus Epiphanes, had violently oppressed the Jews and desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig to Zeus on the altar. But Judas Maccabeus conquered the Gentile occupying forces, liberated the city from their oppressors, and cleansed the temple. He too was welcomed into Jerusalem with thankful crowds waving palm branches. (2 Maccabees 10:7¹).

3. How does this story, along with the chants of the crowd (verse 9) and the story of 2 Kings 9:1-13, all help envision what the crowds welcoming Jesus were expecting?

4. How does this contrast with what Jesus was trying to show by choosing to ride in on a donkey?

1 1-2 Maccabees are books that are part of what is known as the Apocrypha, written in the intertestamental period, which Catholics and some others consider part of the biblical canon. Maccabees 10:7 reads, “Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place.”

Though Jesus' arrival begins with much fanfare, the major emphasis of this chapter is how he comes in judgment. The surprise, of course, is the focus of his judgment. Michael Green draws this out: "The almost contemporary *Psalms of Solomon* expressed the belief that 'he shall purge Jerusalem of Gentile defilement, making it holy as of old.' In point of fact, Jesus comes to cleanse the court of the Gentiles from Jewish defilement!"¹

But while we call this a 'cleansing' of the Temple, in actuality, it was more of a prophetic judgment. The temple authorities had made a commercial enterprise in the place where God intended prayer and praise.

5. What can this passage teach us about true worship? Consider your individual worship and our corporate worship— is there anything Jesus might be displeased with and want to overturn? Explain.

The next day, as they are heading back into the city again, Jesus curses a fruitless fig tree. A fig tree is a frequent symbol of Israel in the Old Testament.² So there is much more going on here than Jesus taking out his anger on an insensate thing. Michael Wilkins explains further,

Jesus' cursing the fig tree is not a fit of temper but a symbolic act, demonstrating that God's creatures must produce that for which they were created— to carry out God's will, which means entering into a discipleship relationship with him and then demonstrating fruit from that relationship and a life of faith empowered by prayer.³

6. Read the following verses and reflect on the state of your own fruitfulness. Where are areas for you to grow and where do you see progress?
 - Philippians 1:9-11
 - Galatians 5:22-23
 - Hebrews 13:15

1 Green, 220

2 For example, Jeremiah 8:13, Hosea 9:10, Micah 7:1.

3 Wilkins, 694

Jesus' word of prophetic judgment on Israel and its temple worship came to pass when the Romans came in the years leading up to 70 AD and, with awful thoroughness, they slaughtered many and razed the temple, which was never rebuilt.

7. Consider this story of the fig tree along with John 15:1-8. How should these words challenge and warn Christians and churches today that are not showing any signs of fruitfulness?

In verses 23-27, Jesus is confronted when he comes into the temple. They attack his authority, calling in question his credentials to level the kind of critique he has against the religious establishment. But Jesus responds with a question of his own about John the Baptist. This is no dodge. Read Malachi 3:1-2 which is both a prophecy of the coming of John and of Jesus. To recognize the forebearer is to recognize the one he points to as being given authority by God. But the religious authorities can't bear the thought of acknowledging Jesus' authority.

8. Write a prayer to the Lord acknowledging his authority over every aspect of your life. Admit to him where this is hard for you, and ask for his help as you seek to submit to him more and more.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Revel in the Lord's kind and benevolent sovereignty over all things. Read Psalm 145 and praise the King spoken of there! Praise this mighty and majestic One who came in humility and sacrificial love.

Repent. Confess any tendency you recognize in your heart to buck God's authority. Acknowledge areas in which the 'temple' of your body/heart has become polluted with attitudes and actions that are unbecoming of God's dwelling place.

Request.

- Pray for fruit in your life and in the life of SBCC corporately.
- Consider those things that stand in opposition to Christ's church and shout 'hosanna' (save us!).
- Ask God to help you embody both the hatred of sin and the humility of spirit that we see in Jesus.

Study 33

Matthew 21:28-22:14

Share with your homegroup about a time when you received an invitation you were excited about. What did accepting the invitation mean to you?

At this point in Matthew's narrative, Jesus has made his symbolic entrance in Jerusalem and has made a dramatic statement in the Temple. The events that will lead to his death and resurrection are set in motion. Time is running out.

But here the narrative pauses. In our passage last week, Jesus was confronted by religious leaders trying to trap him into saying something they can arrest him for. He responds with three parables.

Read the three parables in Matthew 21:28-22:14 carefully. Read through each one several times if necessary. Sketch out the main point each parable is making. Where are there similarities and differences?

1. What is the "way of righteousness" John showed the people of Israel (vs. 32)? How does it relate to the story of the two sons?

2. Which people in Israel do each of the two sons represent in the story?

Up until now, Jesus has frequently called the Jewish leaders to account for failing to fulfill their calling. His critique becomes more pointed with these stories; there can be no mistaking his meaning. Wilkins expounds:

Sinners who repent will obey God and by it show their repentance. It does not matter if they once turned their backs on God. God wants obedience. The Jewish leaders are hypocritical in that they talk but do not live up to their talk. In the final analysis, it is the fruit of our lives that proves whether or not we are submissive to God's message through his messengers.¹

3. Is there any place in your life where you might give lip service to God's authority but deny it with your actual behavior? Think about this and ask God to make it clear to you.

4. In the parable of the tenants, what are the tenants supposed to be doing? What is symbolized by this task? In other words, what work had God given the leaders of Israel to do, up until the time of Jesus?

5. Look again at verses 42-44. How would the original hearers have interpreted this?

Now take some time with the third parable. A royal wedding is taking place, and invitations have been issued from the monarch! Amazingly, some invited guests shrug off the honor. When another summons arrives directly from the king, the refusal becomes a personal insult.

6. What is symbolized here by the invitation to a celebratory feast?

¹ Wilkins, 696

In thinking about what it means to be chosen, F.F. Bruce is helpful in reflecting on this parable. He writes, "The feast is a parable of the gospel and the blessings which it holds out to believers. The invitation to believe the gospel and enjoy its blessings goes out to all who hear it. But if all receive the call, not all respond to it. Those who do respond show by that very fact they are 'chosen.'"¹

The statement in verse 14 about "few" being chosen is worth another note. Is this a statement about numbers—that in the end, not very many people will be saved? Here's Bruce again.

The gnostic teachers whose ideas are reflected in the *Gospel of Thomas* rather liked the idea that 'the single and the chosen ones' were a small minority, provided that they themselves were included in that elite number. On one occasion the disciples tried to make Jesus commit himself on the relative number of the called and the chosen, asking, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' (Luke 13:23). But he refused to gratify their curiosity: he simply told them to make sure that they themselves entered in through the narrow gate, 'for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'²

10. Jesus' warnings about responding to the gospel's invitation are, not surprisingly, reflected elsewhere in Scripture as well. Take some time with the verses below and think about how God is at work in your heart to respond actively to God's love for you. In other words, how can you be a "doer of the Word," and not just a hearer?

- Romans 2:13

- James 3:22-25

11. Read Isaiah 61:10 (below, NLT) and reflect on it with your homegroup. If this is true of you as a child of God, a radiantly dressed participant of God's wedding feast, what difference does it make in your life?

*I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God!
 For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation
 and draped me in a robe of righteousness.
 I am like a bridegroom in his wedding suit
 or a bride with her jewels.*

¹ Bruce, 203

² Bruce, 203-204

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Let your heart overflow with gratitude to a God who has welcomed you to feast at his table as an honored son or daughter.

Repent. Look back over this week's verses and consider if there is any way in which the Holy Spirit is nudging you to repent of hardheartedness or disobedience.

Request. Ask God to change your heart where it's cold or indifferent. Pray for yourself, your family, your homegroup, the church, and anyone else God brings to your mind, that they would respond to God wholeheartedly and unreservedly.

Study 34

Matthew 22:15-46

Our passage this week consists of four encounters between Jesus and members of several different groups, both political and religious. Read carefully through each of the four encounters and take notes. Don't rush through the reading!

For each of the episodes, answer these three questions:

	What is the topic?	Who is asking the question?	What is the reaction to Jesus' words?
Verses 15-22			
Verses 23-33			
Verses 34-40			
Verses 41-46			

1. What do you imagine the religious and political leaders are hoping to achieve by these Q&A sessions?

Jesus's statement in verse 21 provides a principle for Christians living in the world as citizens of the Kingdom of God. As Wilkins explains,

Our allegiance to God should not promote aloofness from giving to Caesar or rebellion against Caesar. Nor should our allegiance to Caesar ever infringe on our allegiance to God. And when the kingdom of Caesar infringes on the kingdom of God, the penetrating proviso of Peter and the other apostles comes into play: 'We must obey God rather than men!' (Acts 5:29).¹

¹ Wilkins, 737

2. Read Romans 13:1-7. When have you experienced a situation where you felt a conflict between the command to be subject to secular authorities, and your primary loyalty to God?

3. Consider the second set of questions, related to marriage at the resurrection. What does Jesus mean by his assertion that they “did not know the scriptures or the power of God”?

The Sadducees were a wealthy and powerful political group who accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and denied the existence of spiritual elements of Judaism, such as immortality, resurrection, angels and spirits, and a future messiah.¹ Jesus seems to be rebuking them for all of these things with his statement in verse 29. They are asking the wrong questions! Their picking and choosing from the Scriptures, as well as the way their beliefs boxed in and limited God’s agency, rendered them unable to recognize the truth when it was right in front of them.

We all have different starting points when it comes to knowing the scriptures; some of us have been studying them for decades, while others are brand new to the study of the Word. Still others have been Christians for a long time but have given little attention to regular, disciplined study of the Bible. Take a few minutes to consider your relationship to the Bible.

4. What have been the greatest challenges for you when it comes to the call to grow in knowledge and love of the Word? How can your homegroup encourage you in this?

In his reflections on this encounter between Jesus and the Sadducees, Michael Wilkins gives us a strong word of encouragement:

We must commit ourselves to knowing the full teaching of Scripture, not just those selections or books that we find comfortable or compatible with our own worldview. The Bible will make us uncomfortable with our sin. It will also point out that it is incompatible with our secularist cultural baggage and philosophies.²

¹ Wilkins, 731

² Wilkins, 738

Likewise, in what ways are we also guilty of denying or ignoring the power of God? Read Ephesians 1:18-20 and take some time to think about God's power that is at work in the believer.

5. How have you experienced this power? In what ways would you like to grow in your awareness of, and reliance on, the Holy Spirit?

Reflect now on verses 34-40. Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees get together and send a representative to try his hand at trapping Jesus into saying something actionable. Jesus' reply consists of two Old Testament quotes that, as Wilkins goes on to clarify, would have been very familiar to his listeners.

The twice-daily Shema¹ was well known as an overarching obligation of each individual Jew, and it included the duty of obedience to the other commandments given by God (see the similar logic in 5:16-20).²

6. No response is recorded from the Pharisees. Why do you think this is the case? What might they have been thinking?

There's a lot to digest in this week's passage, but don't miss the opportunity to sit for a while with Jesus' words in verses 37-40, which recall themes from the Sermon on the Mount. Wilkins' reflections on these verses are worth including here.

The person who loves God with all of her being—heart, soul, and mind—will understand that God's will for her life is revealed in the Old Testament, and she will gladly, eagerly, obey it because she knows that in doing so, she is living life the way God has designed it to be lived. In turn, her obedience to God's will transforms her entire being—heart, soul, and mind—into the image of God so that she is more like what God has intended for her to be like. Furthermore, loving her neighbor as herself means that she gives herself to other humans to help them live as God designed life to be lived, so that she helps them in their own transformation.³

1 The Shema was, and is, an essential Jewish daily prayer. To learn more about it and hear it recited in Hebrew, see <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-shema/>.

2 Wilkins, 725

3 Wilkins, 726

7. If this is a pattern that you've seen in your life, describe some examples to share with your homegroup.

8. Finally, Jesus asks a question of his own. Read back through verses 41-46. What point is Jesus making with his question here to the Pharisees?

All along, Jesus has made claims about who he is and what his relationship is with God the Father. These claims become more pointed as he nears the cross—as do the warnings to those who refuse to respond with faith. In the coming chapters, we will see much more on this unfolding theme.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for the Scriptures and for the power of God. Delight in his amazing love. Worship him in his true identity as Messiah, both fully God and fully human. What else has arisen for you in your study of these verses that leads you to praise God?

Repent. Open your heart to God and ask him to reveal to you the places where he wants you to give yourself more completely to him. Confess ways in which you have not loved God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And always ask for help in repenting!

Request. Pray for insight into the Word of God, helping you to understand what you read and to allow it to shape your heart, thinking and desires. Ask for the Holy Spirit's help in grasping the character of God and how he wants you to serve him.

Study 35

Matthew 23

Every good narrative features conflict and, often, literary conflict is driven by the presence and action of an antagonist. In your opinion, who is the most significant antagonist in literature or film? Be prepared to share (and maybe defend!) your answer with your homegroup.

As we have followed Jesus' ministry through the Gospel of Matthew, the rift between him and the religious authorities has grown steadily wider. In this week's reading, Jesus will speak some harsh and direct words about those who had set themselves up as his opponents.

Read Matthew 23:1-24:2. As you do, make a note of anything that stands out to you or confuses you.

In 23:2, Jesus refers to two groups within Israel's religious structure: teachers of the law (sometimes called "scribes") and Pharisees. These two groups, though distinct from one another, shared much in common. Carson explains,

The "teachers of the law," most of them Pharisees in Matthew's time, were primarily responsible for teaching. "Pharisee" defines a loose theological position, not a profession like "teacher." The two terms are distinct, even if there is much overlap on the personal level.¹

1. In verse 3, Jesus insists that his disciples must listen to the religious leaders, but not follow their example. How does this instruction strike you?

¹ Carson, 471.

2. Verses 4-7 contain the heart of Jesus' indictment against the Pharisees and teachers of the law. How would you summarize his criticism?

3. In significant ways, Jesus calls his followers to live differently than those revered in their religious community. What are the characteristics of a disciple as Jesus lays them out in verses 8-12?

4. This is not a general rebuke of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. Using the emotive term "woe," Jesus condemns seven specific actions in verses 13-31. What is the primary accusation that Jesus makes in each of the following?
 - Verse 13

 - Verse 15

 - Verses 16-22

 - Verse 23-24

 - Verses 25-26

 - Verses 27-28

 - Verses 29-32

-
5. Which, if any, of these hypocrisies is your heart prone to?

 6. Jesus goes to great lengths in this chapter to get the attention of the religious leaders. How has Jesus gotten your attention in life?

 7. Verses 33-36 offer a scathing word to those who do not repent and continue to lead others into error. What does this tell you about God's heart for truth and righteousness?

 8. While this chapter makes clear that God does not tolerate leading people astray, verse 37 also contains an important reminder about God's heart for rebellious people (or cities!). What aspects of God's character are highlighted in that verse?

 9. We have to remember that the religious observance of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees was born out of a desire for faithfulness and yet they still found themselves on the receiving end of this rebuke from Jesus. How can we help one another to avoid such a situation in our lives?

10. At the outset of chapter 23, Jesus describes these leaders as those who “sit in Moses’ seat” (v. 2), but then goes on to offer a shocking assessment of their leadership. What lessons about spiritual leadership can contemporary followers of Jesus take away from his words here?

The dramatic action of the past few chapters is brought to a resounding close at the start of chapter 24. Since Jesus first entered the temple in 21:12, he has been in nearly constant arguments and battles with the various religious groups of the day.

11. How do 24:1-2 serve as a fitting final act to the protracted conflict in the temple?

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for his heart that cares for truth and righteousness and also longs to gather the rebellious into his arms. Praise him for his patience with those whose discipleship is imperfect.

Repent. Name the ways that your discipleship has been partial. Name any ways that your heart is tempted toward the same hypocrisies that Jesus calls out in this chapter.

Request. Following Jesus faithfully is challenging—and leaders are not exempt! Pray for SBCC’s leaders (staff, Elders, small group leaders) to walk faithfully with Jesus, to speak truth, and to model lives of authenticity and integrity to the Word of God.

Study 36

Matthew 24

Tell about a time when you found yourself in a situation where something you imagined or hoped would be simple turned out to be more complicated than you had expected.

Last week's passage left off on a striking note as Jesus left the temple and dramatically pronounced judgment on the religious leaders of the day with a startling image of destruction. Naturally, the disciples are left with some questions. Read Matthew 24:3-51 and make a note of anything that stands out to you, that confuses you (there may be plenty!), or that you want to be sure to discuss with your homegroup.

If this chapter has left you scratching your head, you're in good company! As Don Carson writes, "Few chapters of the Bible have called forth more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24....The history of the interpretation of this chapter is immensely complex."¹ At the center of the interpretive debates is the question of timing for all that Jesus promises here. Some consider these events fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Others see this chapter as exclusively detailing events related to the future, second coming of Christ. Still others see here some combination of these possibilities in which some of the events had a near-term fulfillment in the lifetime of the disciples while yet other events still await future fulfillment.²

Rather than get into the weeds of various interpretive schemes, however, let's try to take a look at the big picture offered by Jesus' words in this chapter. At the end of last week's passage, Jesus offered some dire promises about the future of the temple in Jerusalem. In this week's passage, the disciples ask an understandable question about the timing of what Jesus said was coming and, in response, get more than they likely bargained for.

1 Carson, 488.

2 And that's still not all of the possibilities as, within the third view, there is significant disagreement on which events belong to which category. There are also a group of interpreters who see no distinction between the history and the future, preferring to understand the real events of AD 70 as a template for future events of an even greater judgment not only on Jerusalem, but the entire world.

1. What emotions do you imagine inform the disciples' question in verse 3?

Due to its setting on the Mount of Olives, this passage is often referred to as The Olivet Discourse, an extended section of teaching that will last through chapter 25.

2. This chapter features numerous predictions and promises, but verses 4-5 begin with a command wrapped in a warning. How do those verses express Jesus' general concern for his disciples?
3. Jesus offers a specific warning against deception in verse 5, one that is echoed in verses 10-11 and 24. How would you summarize the warnings contained in those verses?
4. Deception of Jesus' people is, sadly, not a mere historic curiosity, but is an ever-present threat. What deceptions have you seen the church fall prey to?
5. What does the imagery of birth pains in verse 8 tell Jesus' disciples about the difficulties he predicts and promises here?

6. Though there is plenty in verses 4-35 that may leave us unsettled, there are rich promises throughout these verses, as well. Read back over these verses and make a list of all that Jesus promises to his followers—both then and now—that can serve to bolster faithfulness in times of uncertainty.

In a bit of Christian irony, many have spent countless hours and immeasurable amounts of ink to do what verse 36 says is beyond human capacity: to show a knowledge of the timing of these events!

7. In verses 36-41, Jesus gives a somewhat direct answer to the disciples' original question. What is the point of what he says there? Do you find it easy or difficult to live with the tension of not knowing the specifics of Jesus' promises? Why?
8. How do the parables of verses 42-51 add to what Jesus has already said in this chapter?
9. Look back over the whole chapter. What type of posture is Jesus trying to cultivate in his followers through what he has said here?

10. How are the characteristics of a disciple that Jesus outlines in this chapter already on display in your life? In which areas would you like to see growth? Be prepared to share with your homegroup.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God that he is the sovereign and rules over all things, even the future. Praise God for his great promises here in Matthew 24 and in the rest of Scripture.

Repent. Confess any ways that you have failed to display discernment and expectancy in your Christian life. Confess on behalf of the broader church ways that deception has distracted from discipleship.

Request. Ask the Spirit to create in you a heart marked by discernment and expectancy. Ask for the endurance to stand firm to the end (verse 13).

Study 37

Matthew 25

This week we're looking at Matthew 25, which is Part II of the long section of Jesus' teaching known as the Olivet Discourse. If you have a "red letter" Bible, with Jesus' words highlighted, both chapter 24 and chapter 25 are almost entirely red! If you missed last week or need to refresh your memory, be sure to read back through chapter 24 to familiarize yourself with the main themes.

This week consists of three separate sections of discourse that continue to develop the topics of the previous chapter. Jesus is getting closer and closer to the cross, and his warnings to his disciples feel increasingly urgent. The stakes are high.

1. Beginning with Matt. 25:1-13 with the parable of the ten virgins, jot down your notes, questions, and observations. What's the main point?
2. What do you think it means to "keep watch" or to be prepared for the Lord's return? Conversely, what would the lifestyle and actions look like of a Christian who is not "keeping watch"?
3. Think back to where we have been in Matthew; flip back through the previous chapters if necessary. Where has Jesus already given warnings about the need for his followers to be ready for his return?

NT Wright gives us a little more interpretive help as we reflect on what Jesus wants to communicate to us through this story.

It's probably wrong to try to guess what the oil in the story 'stands for' (some have suggested that it means good works; others faith, or love, or almost any of the Christian virtues). It isn't that kind of story. Within the world of the story itself, it simply means being ready for the key moment...What matters is being ready; being prepared; being wise; thinking ahead, realizing that a crisis is coming sooner or later and that if you don't make preparations now, and keep

them in good shape in the meantime, you'll wish you had.... We need as much as ever the warning that it's easy to go slack on the job, to stop paying attention to God's work and its demands, to be unprepared when the moment suddenly arrives.¹

4. Next, read through Matt. 25:14-30, the parable of the bags of gold. What questions or observations do you have?

5. Think back to other parables we've seen recently in Matthew. Can you recall other stories about a master who goes away and leaves his subordinates tasks to perform in his absence? Describe these, and the point the parables were making. Who is represented by the master in these stories? Who are the unfaithful or disobedient servants? Who are the servants who respond appropriately to their master's call?²
 - Master

 - Unfaithful servants

 - Faithful servants

NT Wright fills in the picture for us. The first two servants of this parable are, he says,

...those who hear the call of Jesus and, on that basis, develop what Israel has already been given so that it now becomes something new. They are like the mustard seed in 13:31-32, which starts small and then grows large. They are the signs that God's kingdom is starting to bud and blossom. And now, when Jesus has come to Jerusalem to force the final confrontation between God's kingdom and the system that had resisted and opposed it—then those who are loyal to him will be like those who have made wise use of the money that had been entrusted to him.”³

1 Wright, 133-135

2 If you need a hint: Matthew 21:33-46, Matthew 24:45-51

3 Wright, 138

6. Now we come to the third section in our chapter this week. Read through Matt. 25:31-46, the passage about the sheep and the goats. As usual, jot down your initial notes and questions.

7. Verses 31-46 contain some words that are very challenging to hear—perhaps not because they are unclear, but because they are clear. What phrase or sentence challenges you the most?

If you think back over the last few chapters, you will remember a prominent theme emerging in Jesus' discourse as he gets closer and closer to the cross—that although he will suffer, he will afterwards be vindicated and lifted up as the just and rightful ruler over all things. This passage about the sheep and the goats further develops this theme.

8. Read Ezekiel 34, on the theme of God being the shepherd of his people. How does our Matthew passage reflect what we learn about God in Ezekiel 34?

One of the difficult things about passages like this one is the stark warnings about being judged by our actions. On the surface, it can sound as though Jesus is saying that our salvation rests on our behavior. This can produce anxiety in us, and possibly confusion as we remember that we are saved through faith in Christ alone.

9. Read Ephesians 2:8-10. What is the connection between being saved by faith in Jesus and being judged by one's life and actions?

Wilkins clarifies by pointing out the surprised reaction of the sheep who are rewarded.

The surprise of the 'righteous' sheep... comes from their taking literally his words, because they can recall no time when they have done this to the King. Such surprise indicates that these were not intentional meritorious acts to gain access to the kingdom. Rather, these acts of mercy are evidences that the sheep belong to the kingdom, just as the preceding parables pointed out external behavioral evidences of a person who has truly received the gift of salvation and the resulting transformation by the Spirit.... These good deeds are not the works by which one enters the kingdom; they are the substantiation of the kind of kingdom life that has been produced through the transformation of the heart of his disciples through regeneration. Their works of caring for the needy among them will confirm that they belong to Jesus.¹

10. Reflect on the quote above. In what ways have you allowed the Spirit to transform you since you became a believer? In what areas of your life are you praying for further transformation?

Finally, this passage deals with the topic of final judgment as an element of Jesus' second coming. This is a topic that, frankly, is often especially difficult to understand for believers who are in a position of comfort and social power. To such people, teaching about God's judgment of evil can sound harsh or even unnecessary. But throughout global history, Christians who suffer injustice, persecution and oppression have found tremendous comfort in biblical promises of judgment. God has promised to set the world right, to put an end to evil and injustice and suffering forever! This is indeed reason for Jesus' own sheep to rejoice.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise Jesus for who he reveals himself to be in this passage—the one who holds his people accountable, the true master and Lord of all, the one who brings justice to the world.

Repent. If there's anything here that has particularly challenged your attitudes, assumptions, or lifestyle, bring it to the Lord. Repent of anything God brings to your mind.

Request. Ask God to help you grow in readiness, and to help you to live your life as a faithful servant preparing for the return of the King. Pray for persecuted Christians and all who suffer injustice, asking that God would set right all that has gone wrong in this world.

¹ Wilkins, 810

Study 39

Matthew 26:47-27:66

Jesus has been candid throughout the Gospel of Matthew about where the road ahead of him was leading: to Jerusalem, where he would suffer at the hands of the religious leaders and would be put to death by the Romans. In this week's passage, we will take a closer look at these shocking events.

This week's reading is lengthy, but make time to read through it all in one sitting and allow the scope of the narrative to sink in. If this story is already very familiar to you, make an effort to slow down as you read, and ask the Spirit to awaken your mind and heart to see with fresh eyes.

Read Matthew 26:47-27:66 and use the space below to make a note of anything that stands out to you.

After offering impassioned prayers to the Father and challenging his disciples to greater watchfulness in Gethsemane, the action begins to pick up with the arrival of Judas and a large crowd.

1. Look again at verses 47-54. Compare Jesus' response to Judas with his response to the disciple who used his sword (John's gospel identifies him as Peter). What do you notice about each?
2. Throughout these events, Jesus demonstrates a noticeable sense of purpose and even control. Which of his words or actions throughout these chapters show his commitment to the Father's plan?

Verses 57-68 detail Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. Wilkins succinctly describes this group, saying, "The national 'Sanhedrin' was the official adjudicating body of the Jews (similar to a supreme court), which the Roman authorities allowed to handle Jewish cases unless they impinged on Roman rule."¹

3. Jesus' claim in verse 64 alludes to Psalm 110 and Daniel 7:13-14. Read each of those brief passages. By referencing these, what claims was Jesus making about himself that would have prompted the charge of blasphemy?

4. Chapter 26 ends with Peter's lowest moment. Now that Jesus has been arrested and put on trial, the pressure of the situation seems to overwhelm Peter, leading him to do something he swore he'd never do (see 26:33). Though Peter's denials are stunning, this is a scenario that many of us have no difficulty imagining. What pressure-filled situations cause you to feel similar unease about confidently claiming allegiance to Jesus?

Though the Sanhedrin had been granted authority to hear concerns over religious matters, only Rome had the power to carry out capital punishment. With the Sanhedrin's mock proceedings concluded, Jesus is now brought before Pontius Pilate, the regional governor assigned to oversee the region of Judea on behalf of Rome.

5. How does Pilate's question in verse 11 relate to the charge that the Sanhedrin settled on in 26:65?

¹ Wilkins, 242.

6. Because of Jesus' near-total silence, the real action in these verses takes place between Pilate and other people or groups. What impression are you left with about Pilate after the various interactions in 27:11-26? What impression are you left with about the Jewish leaders?

7. Jesus endured stunning mockery from various groups of people. The insults look different, but for many in our time, Jesus is still an object of suspicion, if not outright scorn. What are some of the ways that Jesus is still belittled or subjected to mockery today?

8. Matthew's treatment of Jesus' death includes numerous significant details. Take a few moments to consider why each of the following things may be important or how each may point to other biblical imagery. Talk through the significance of each with your homegroup.
 - Darkness over the land

 - Jesus' reference to Psalm 22

 - The torn curtain in the temple

 - The emptying tombs

 - The confession of the centurion

9. Which elements of the account of Jesus' burial in verses 57-66 serve to give an impression of finality to Jesus' story?

10. Read 1 Peter 2:23-25. What was the purpose of Jesus' suffering?

The grisly and gut-wrenching events of these Scriptures lie at the heart of Jesus' mission in the world. These are the lengths that God's redemptive love went to in order to restore us to himself. As we approach Easter, may these truths prompt greater worship in each of us.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for his extravagant love and mercy for sinners. Praise Jesus for his submission to the Father's plan of redemption, though it took him to agonizing and humiliating places.

Repent. Confess any ways in which you persist in sin despite having been redeemed by Jesus' atoning sacrifice. Name any ways in which, like Peter, your words or your actions fail to confess Jesus' lordship.

Request. Ask God for a fresh awareness of the costliness of sin and increased sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading into paths of holiness. Ask for opportunities to share with those who may not have heard the good news of a God willing to redeem rebels even at great cost to himself.

Study 40

Matthew 28:1-15

We are now in the midst of Holy Week, as most Christians around the world prepare to celebrate Easter this coming Sunday.¹ After the gruesome events we considered in last week's passage and study, this week we reach the climactic moment of the story of Jesus' earthly life and ministry: his resurrection from the dead! Just when things seemed darkest for Jesus' followers, the story completely changes.

Read Matthew 28:1-15 and make a note of anything that stands out to you.

1. The events of these verses mark the most dramatic turnaround in history. Take a moment to glance back over Matthew 26:47-27:66. What emotions do you notice in yourself as you revisit those passages? Now, do the same for 28:1-15. What emotions do you feel as you consider this week's passage?

Angels are somewhat cryptic figures in the Bible. Variouslly pictured as warriors or messengers, one thing that is clear about angels is that, inevitably, when they appear on the scene, they represent God in the world.

2. Verses 2-4 evoke a number of other stories in Scripture. What other passages or events from the Bible come to mind as you read about the angel's dramatic appearance? Maybe work together with your homegroup to compile a list.

¹ The Eastern Orthodox churches will celebrate Easter 2023 a week later, on April 16. The reason for the different dates is that the Roman Catholic Church and later Protestant churches follow the Gregorian calendar while the Eastern Orthodox churches follow the Julian calendar.

3. Jesus' very public death and burial would have naturally prompted despair for his followers, including the women who have now come to his tomb. What reasons or reminders does the angel give in verses 5-7 that would allow the women to live into the command, "Do not be afraid"?

4. A visitation from an angel is always a dramatic event in the Scriptures, but in verses 8-10, the four women get something even more spectacular: an encounter with the risen Jesus himself. Why might this have been a critical moment in the flow of Matthew's narrative?

Each of the four Gospels indicates that the first witnesses to the resurrected Lord were women.¹ This detail is a strong indicator of the historicity of the resurrection. Writing in the *Africa Bible Commentary*, Joe Kapolyo explains the significance,

The witness of women was of little value in Israel; it was certainly not admissible in court....So it is surprising that the Gospels report that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. Matthew would not have made up this detail, because men would not have accepted it. The story is told this way because it is the historical truth.²

5. What do you think this detail indicates about the nature of the gospel and the kingdom of God?

1 Though each Gospel's account of the resurrection features different details and different points of emphasis, a constant feature in each is that at least one woman was among the initial witnesses to Jesus after he conquered the grave.

2 Joe Kapolyo, "Matthew," in the *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1195.

6. Verse 8 describes the women departing the tomb as “afraid yet filled with joy.” When have you experienced similar emotions in your walk with Jesus?

7. Upon seeing Jesus, the women respond in adoring worship. When, if ever, have you been similarly overcome with affection for Christ?

8. Why might Jesus have repeated the command of the angel for the women to go and tell the disciples the good news of his resurrection?

9. Many of us may find it easier to worship Jesus than to tell others about him. Does that ring true for you? If so, are there places or relationships in which the Spirit may be calling you to declare the good news of the risen Jesus?

10. Matthew’s gospel has repeatedly put on display the rift between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. How do verses 11-15 serve to further that picture?

11. The New Testament authors treat Christ's resurrection both as the seal of our redemption and the promise of our own resurrection. Choose at least one of the following passages and make note of how the author draws out the implications of Christ's victory over the grave.

- Acts 3:22-36
- Romans 6:1-14
- 1 Corinthians 15:12-34
- Colossians 1:15-18
- Hebrews 13:20-21

This Sunday, we will gather to declare a single stunning truth that has changed the world: that Jesus of Nazareth was truly dead and truly buried, but by the power of the Spirit, God raised him from the dead in shocking victory over death itself! Praise the One who described himself, saying, "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18)!

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise God for Jesus' victory over the grave! Thank him for the freedom from fear that comes with the resurrection (Hebrews 2:14-15). Praise Jesus for his endurance and faithfulness to the Father's plan to redeem all creation.

Repent. Name any ways in which your discipleship does not reflect the reality of the newness of life made possible by Christ's resurrection. Confess ways in which the church has failed to faithfully declare the prominence of the risen Christ.

Request. Ask God to make you ready to bear witness with your words to the power of the risen Lord and to make you attuned to opportunities to give witness. Ask God to move in mighty ways this Easter to draw many people to himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Study 38

Matthew 26:1-46

Soon we will begin Holy Week, which begins with Palm Sunday (April 2nd this year) and concludes with Easter Sunday. Flip back in your Bible to the beginning of Matthew 21. In the space below, map out the events of Jesus' week; where he was each day, as far as you can tell from the text, and what he was doing.

- Palm Sunday
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Easter Sunday

Our passage this week, Matthew 26:1-46, begins two days before the Passover. Read through these verses and take note of the main events and anything that particularly stands out to you.

1. Contemplate the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with perfume. What is in her heart? What is in the disciples' hearts?
2. What does extravagant, heartfelt worship look like for you? How might you cultivate more of this in your life?
3. If it's hard for you to give your heart unreservedly to Christ, what would need to change in order to respond to him in this way?
4. Note the timing in the narrative of Judas' decision. How might his actions be linked to what has just taken place?

Jesus and his disciples gather together to eat the Passover meal, commemorating the Israelites' rescue out of slavery in Egypt several hundred years before. The meal, still observed by Jewish people, consists of symbolic foods and is eaten while recounting the scriptures that tell the story of God's deliverance. This is the setting that Jesus chooses for his last and most important meal with his friends.

At a Seder meal, tradition dictates that the head of the family is to break a piece of unleavened bread and recite a blessing, as Bruce describes,

[Giving] thanks for it in time-honored language: 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.' But at the Last Supper Jesus, as head of his 'family,' having given thanks for the bread, added words which gave the bread a new significance: 'Take it,' he said to the disciples, 'this is my body'....The Passover meal was a memorial of the great deliverance at the time of the exodus; now a new memorial was being instituted in view of a new and greater deliverance about to be accomplished.¹

5. Reflect on the above quote. How is Jesus' death and resurrection a parallel and fulfillment of the Exodus story?²

6. At SB Community, we observe the Lord's Supper weekly as a key part of our worship. What does this ritual mean to you? How could your study of Matthew 26 deepen your understanding of what we are doing as a community when we take the bread and cup together?

7. Even though Jesus is straightforward with his disciples about what is going to happen in the coming days, they appear either to misunderstand or to disbelieve him. Identify all the places in 26:1-46 where Jesus speaks to his disciples about what lies ahead. What do you think is going through their minds as they hear these things?

Put yourself in the place of the disciples as they finish what must have been an unsettling Passover meal. The group of friends sing a hymn together to close, and then set out into the night. As they are walking, Jesus has more to say about what is about to happen. Read back through verses 31-35 again.

1 Bruce, 237

2 If you need a refresher on the Exodus story, check out the video at <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/exodus-1-18/>.

8. The disciples' insistence that they would never let Jesus down is a sad foreshadowing of their later failures. Why do you think Jesus tells them in advance that they will betray him?

9. Take some time with verses 36-46, the scene in the garden of Gethsemane. What temptation is Jesus speaking to Peter about in verse 41?

10. The disciples' inability to be present with Jesus in his darkest hour is heartrending, but all too familiar to most of us two thousand years later. What barriers are currently making it hard for you to be present with Jesus and faithful to him at all costs?

11. As we approach Holy Week, how can you plan ahead to be with Jesus during the week? Are there any practices or rituals that might be helpful? Compare ideas with your homegroup and commit to setting aside time and space for contemplation and worship.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Walk slowly back through the events of this passage and worship Jesus for his worthiness, his beauty, his deity and his humanity. Take joy in knowing him and belonging to him.

Repent. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to repent. Is there anything in you that is lukewarm toward Jesus? Have you, like the disciples, been drowsy and inattentive and distracted when you were called to be vigilant in your faith? Have you, like Peter, denied Jesus in some way?

Request. Pray for a renewed devotion to Christ this Holy Week. Ask God to draw you closer to himself. Pray for the church around the globe, worshiping and celebrating this week—ask that many would come to trust in Jesus for the first time.

Study 41

Matthew 28:16-20

Many of us have sayings or maxims that we follow in life. What's one principle that you try to live by? It could be humorous or serious, it could be applied to a specific situation or to all of life. Be prepared to share with your homegroup!

This week's study will bring us to the end of our time in Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Though it may seem like there can't be much left after the universe-altering events of Easter, let's return one last time to the story of Jesus and his disciples.

Read Matthew 28:16-20 and make a note of anything that stands out to you or any questions you may have.

1. This is the first appearance of the disciples since their desertion and Peter's denial in chapter 26. What does Matthew say about them here? What, if anything, strikes you about this brief post-resurrection depiction of Jesus' followers?

2. What claims does Jesus make about himself in these short verses?

3. What commands does he give his disciples?

4. The main verb in verse 19 is “make disciples.” How has your study of Matthew impacted your understanding of what it means to become a disciple?

5. How do the claims of Jesus in these verses serve to provide courage to fulfill the commands of Jesus in these verses?

6. What do you make of Jesus entrusting such a significant task to the very people who had failed him during his moment of suffering?

7. If you are a believer in Jesus, it is because someone in your life or in history took seriously Jesus’ calling in these verses. Who first challenged you toward discipleship to Jesus?

8. The book of Matthew doesn't end with some material that may be familiar from the other gospels like the Ascension and conversation on the road to Emmaus in Luke or the reinstatement of Peter in John. What is significant about the way that Matthew ends?

9. The words of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 are commonly referred to as "The Great Commission" and, more than just a helpful maxim or principle, they form the foundational marching orders for the church that would arise from the Jesus revolution. How have you seen SBCC prioritize this calling? Where does SBCC have room to grow?

Think about the picture of the disciples that has emerged in your study of Matthew. They have rarely seemed like anyone's first choice to lead a movement of redemptive good news, yet the story of the church begins with the faithfulness of these eleven and the other early followers of Jesus.

10. Those who belong to the family of God by faith in Jesus have now taken up the mantle of the Great Commission, yet for many of us, this feels like a daunting ask. How can the example of the disciples and the claims of Jesus serve to encourage your faithfulness to the fulfilling of the Great Commission? Who is there in your life that you would like to see become a disciple and begin to live life in flourishing obedience to Jesus?

11. As we wrap up our time in Matthew's Gospel, take a few minutes to think about the ground we've covered since we started this journey in January 2022. What has stuck with you? What has challenged you? How have you grown in your understanding of God's character and your faithfulness to Jesus? Be sure to spend some time reflecting together as a homegroup and praising God for the ways that he has used this wonderful Gospel to shape us together toward his heart and for his kingdom.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Praise Jesus that, because of his triumph over sin and death itself, he alone has all authority in heaven and on earth. Praise him for the promise that his presence and power will be with his people throughout every season of life. Praise God for the history of those who have taken the Great Commission seriously, leading to the spread of the church worldwide and the growth of faith in our own lives.

Repent. Confess any ways in which you have allowed your perception of yourself to limit your faithfulness to Jesus' commands to go and make disciples. Confess on behalf of the Church (local, global, historic) ways that Jesus followers have gotten distracted from the primary mission Jesus gave.

Request. Ask God to give you increased confidence and opportunities to make disciples of those in your life. Ask God to raise up more people who will go to the nations to make disciples. Ask God to use what you have discovered or been reminded of in your study of the Gospel of Matthew to shape you increasingly into the image of Jesus.