

Bible 101 - Matthew Chapters 1-3

Introduction: Canonically, Matthew is the first of four Gospels in the New Testament. It was written by the Apostle Matthew in approximately 60-65 A.D., but whether it was the first gospel written is anyone's guess. Mark's Gospel was written in approximately the same period and could have been first - as could Luke's, thought to be written around 60 A.D. John's gospel, the non-synoptic, was written in the 90s A.D. But in every way, Matthew's Gospel as first in the New Testament works: it bridges the Old and New Testaments with its many (53 quotes and 76 other references) references to OT prophecy. It was written to a Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah, the one promised by Isaiah, Micah, and all the other prophets. It shows Jesus as king, and presents his ministry in all its dimensions: teaching, preaching and healing. And it ends with Christ's fulfillment of his mission on earth: his death, resurrection and ascension, leaving us with a commission to "go into all the world and preach the gospel."

Who was Matthew? He was one of the 12 disciples/apostles, also known as Levi. (Mark 2:14 records Matthew's call by Jesus from his tax collector's booth). He was a tax collector, a "collaborator" with the Roman government and as such, distrusted by other Jews. He was an eye witness to all that Jesus did and an ear witness to all he said. His gospel, as the other three, is not meant to be a complete biography of Jesus; it is written to show Jesus as Messiah, God's Son, sent to earth to redeem us - Jews and Gentiles alike - from sin, and the curse of death.

Where does it all begin? At our first session on Genesis, I said that the Bible is a unified literary narrative: the story begins in Genesis and finishes in Revelation. It begins with God creating a perfect, harmonious world (Gen. 1 and 2) and by Gen. 3, sin, the conflict of the story, enters. The theme of the Bible is redemption and God is the main character. He is the one whose plan to redeem us is introduced with a hint in Gen. 3:15 and then given much more detail beginning with Gen. 12, the covenant God makes with Abraham. God tells Abraham that he'll have many descendants and through him, all the world will be blessed, a clear reference to the Messiah. And that's one reason that Matthew begins his genealogy of Jesus with Abraham. As we followed the story through Exodus, we saw God's people, the descendants of Abraham, had become slaves in Egypt numbering 2 million. It's 400 years since Genesis ended; God hears the cries of his people, delivers them from Egypt, and takes them into a wilderness "boot camp" to shape them into a "holy nation and a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). He renews his covenant with them, gives them the law and the tabernacle - a set of principles for living together and with him, and a religious system. God asks his people to trust him and obey him; if they do, he promises that they'll be "fruitful and multiply," conquer the land he's giving them, have rain in its season, plentiful harvests and a good life. But the people rebel. And instead of spending two years in the wilderness learning the law and the sacrifices (studied in Leviticus), they spend 40 years (Numbers and Deuteronomy continue the story of the wilderness experience). The entire generation who came out of Egypt die in the wilderness, and it is their children who follow Joshua into the Promised Land. In Joshua they conquer the promised land under Joshua's military leadership and God's strength; in Judges they begin to live in the land and everything falls apart: the people whom God has called a "holy nation and a kingdom of priests" are "doing their own thing." The last verse of Judges reads: "In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." They are not the kingdom God planned them to be; He is their king, but they want "to be like other nations." Samuel, a judge and prophet, warns them that a king will tax them, conscript them into an army, and will generally make their lives harder (1 Samuel 8:10-18). They cry

out for a king and God gives them Saul in 1050 A.D. Saul is a military leader but a king whose jealousy destroys him; David takes his place in 1010 A.D. and he reigns until 970 A.D. David is the greatest king Israel had; he is a "man after God's own heart." But he, too, was flawed. When he dies, Solomon becomes king and begins well: he asks God for wisdom instead of wealth and God gives him both; foreign wives (married for political alliances) lead him astray. He has 40 years of peace, thanks to his father's military success in defeating the Philistines and other enemies, but at the end of his life, in 930 B.C., the kingdom splits into northern and southern division: the northern 10 tribes are called Israel and the southern two are Judah. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, succeeded him and ruled in the south; Jereboam an official in Solomon's court who rebelled against the king, fled to Egypt and returned to lead the N kingdom after the split. Civil war breaks out and continues for years. It's not a pretty picture, and what we learn is that sin destroys. When the people follow God and trust him as their king, they prosper; when they go their own way, they are doomed.

History: Not only is the Bible a unified literary narrative, it emerges from history. These are real people in real places doing real things. Israel is defeated in 722 by Assyria and carried into exile; Judah is defeated in 586 by Babylon and carried into exile. Babylon is overthrown by Persia and the Persian king, Cyrus, allows Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., and a new temple is completed in 516 B.C. In 430 B.C. Malachi becomes a prophet, and it is his prophecy which concludes the Old Testament. In Mal. 3:1, God promises a messenger to prepare the way, and it is John the Baptist whom we meet in Matthew 3.

The Greek conquest: In 330 B.C. Alexander the Great conquers the Persian empire including the land of Israel, and Greek becomes a universal language (and this facilitates the spread of the gospel); in the 3rd century B.C., the Septuagint became the first translation of the Bible: the OT was translated from Hebrew to Greek. During this time, there are no prophets but there are still faithful Jews, a remnant of God's people, who hope for the coming of the promised Messiah to deliver them. In the waning years of the last century B.C., the Romans conquer the known world, including the land of Israel in 63 B.C., and in 37 B.C., the Romans make Herod the Great king of Judah/Israel. It is into this historic situation that Jesus comes. Faithful Jews long for a Messiah who will deliver them from the nearly three quarters of a millennium they've been under foreign rule. Faithful Jews still worship at the temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues in towns all over Israel.

Geography: Along with history, it's important to keep in mind that the Bible is rooted in geography and we'll see this as Jesus begins his ministry. The maps in your Bible and in front of us will become increasingly vital to orient ourselves as Jesus moves around the land ministering to great crowds of people.

Inspired word of God: One more principle of Bible study to keep in mind: The Bible is not like other books. It is God's word. Over a period of 1500 years, more than 40 men wrote words inspired by God which were then compiled as the Bible which we read today. The Holy Spirit moved in the minds and hearts of writers to put down history, poetry, prophecy, epistles and teaching, and a revelation of future events which forms the last book of the 66 in the common canon. Paul tells Timothy, his spiritual heir and successor, in II Tim 3:16 that "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." And Peter says "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were

eyewitnesses of his majesty. . . And we have the word of the prophets made more certain. . . Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (II Peter 1:16, 19-21). The Bible is not just any book; it is God's revelation of himself to us.

Matthew 1:1-17: Matthew is bent on showing that Jesus is God's revelation of himself to us and so he begins with a genealogy listing important ancestors of Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, to demonstrate to his Jewish readers that Jesus is the son of God, the Messiah, the one who brought us salvation.

Matthew 1:18-24: Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is recorded briefly, emphasizing that Jesus came because God said "it's time" and God controlled every detail. In Luke 2, we have a much fuller and detailed look at Jesus' birth. Each Gospel writer begins in a different way. Mark simply begins with Jesus' ministry; John begins with creation: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." When we put them together, we see that Jesus' birth was miraculous, it was made possible by God and God alone. Matthew makes this clear by references to OT prophecy, and by showing how the Holy Spirit and angels are the agents of the miracle. Mary, a virgin (not just a young woman, but a physical virgin) is made pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph has to decide whether to marry her or not; an angel appears to Joseph to tell him about the child, and what his name will be, and Joseph marries her. The name is important: Jesus means "the Lord saves." And Matthew then tells us prophecy is fulfilled (Isaiah 7:14).

Matthew 2: Jesus is born in Bethlehem, again as a fulfillment of prophecy, and of all the Gospel writers, only Matthew tells us about the wisemen or magi who come to worship Jesus. Again, Matthew's purpose is to show the miraculous nature of the birth, and to show that God is in control. God's star directs the wisemen to Jesus; God's angel tells the wisemen not to go back to Herod; God's angel tells Joseph to take Mary and the child to Egypt to escape Herod's death plot. Herod issues a decree to kill all male babies in Bethlehem and the region, and Matthew quotes Jeremiah; when Joseph flees to Egypt, Matthew quotes the Old Testament to tie even this detail to prophecy. An angel again comes to Joseph to tell him it's safe to return: Herod is dead. They settle in Nazareth, and once more, Matthew points to prophecy. We can see even in the first two chapters how important the OT is to Matthew's purpose: All that happens in Jesus' life is fulfillment of God's promises, and God's plan of salvation.

An aside: Herod the Great is only the first of many who plot to thwart Jesus' ministry and thus God's plan of salvation. Herod was a half Jew (not of the royal Davidic line of kings, but an Edomite) who reigned from 37 to 4 B.C. at the Roman government's pleasure. He was ruthless and paranoid about his power. Seeing great economic benefits from the Temple, he spent big money to make it big and beautiful. Pilgrims came to Jerusalem three times a year for Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles festivals; Herod wanted to be sure that as many as possible were attracted by the Temple's grandeur. He organized well, and his party, the Herodians, were Jews who saw benefits to cooperating with the Romans. He built a deep water port in Casarea and built fortresses against attack. When he died, three of his sons succeeded him: Archelaus reigned in Judea, Samaria and Idumea; Herod Antipas received Galilee and Perea; Herod Philip II received Traconitis. Archelaus was a violent man, and because of his reputation, Joseph went to Nazareth when he returned from Egypt.

Matthew 3: We're here introduced to the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist. He's often compared to Elijah (Mal. 4:5) and Jesus tells his disciples that Elijah has already appeared but that he wasn't recognized (Matthew 17:11). Note how he's described as a "voice calling in the desert," and what we'd call a mountain man - a man who lives rough and who eats locusts and wild honey (v 4). Matthew pictures John the Baptist as a rugged individualist called by God to announce Jesus the Messiah's coming. Luke 1 describes John's birth as miraculous and shows that he is Jesus' cousin: John's mother Elizabeth and Mary were cousins, and both had visits from the angel Gabriel announcing the births of sons (Gabriel's appearance in the Bible is always connected with the Messiah). John's message to his generation is "repent" and he's blunt about telling everyone who comes to him that he is not the Messiah, but that his message is from God, and they'd better take heed. John doesn't mince words: "you brood of vipers," he calls them. He doesn't flatter or pretend that the spirituality of the day, the religiosity practiced by the leaders, harmonizes with what God demands. John calls them to repentance and then baptism as an expression of a life turned from sin and to God. He's baptizing in the Jordan River and Jesus goes to him for that purpose.

Jesus' youth: The years between Jesus' birth and this moment at the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13) number about 30; about them we know very little. In Luke 2:41-52, we read of the 12-year-old Jesus astounding the scholars in the Temple with his wisdom and causing Joseph and Mary to worry about him. But at the end of Luke 2, we read that "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men." And that is all we know of his preparation for this moment with John the Baptist. It's probable that Jesus knew the entire Old Testament by heart; this would not have been uncommon for a Jewish boy raised in a devout home. He had great insight into the scripture; that we know from the incident in the Temple. We can also infer from Luke's statement that Jesus was obedient, winsome and that he pleased both his Heavenly Father and his human parents.

Matthew 3:13-17: Jesus asks John to baptize him. Remember John is preaching a baptism which follows repentance. Jesus had no sins to repent of. John knows this; he says "you baptize me," but Jesus replies that his request to be baptized is the right thing to do. It's a public step for Jesus; it's a way for him to identify with the sinners he's come to save. Remember that Paul tells us that "God made him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (II Cor. 5:21). Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, and when he comes up out of the water, we have the entire Trinity together: the Holy Spirit descends to Jesus, filling him with power and strength; the Father's voice is heard saying "this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Jesus the Son hears a public affirmation of his choice to be baptized by John; he is empowered by the Holy Spirit for what is to come. Matthew shows us this in order to prepare us for Jesus' temptation.

Next week: we'll begin with Matthew 4.

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Matthew Chapters 4-5

Review: Last week, we looked at the birth of Jesus and its fulfillment of prophecy, and we saw God's hand at work in every detail of Jesus' coming to earth, his preservation in the face of Herod's threats, and his family's flight to Egypt and return to Nazareth. And we met John the Baptist, the last of the OT prophets, who was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus goes to John to be baptized by him.

We see in Matthew's gospel a distinct point of view: Jesus is here because God sent him; he is God's son and he is the one promised to Abraham and to Israel down through the centuries. As I mentioned last week, Matthew's POV is just one of four. Each of the gospel writers has his own distinct way of looking at Jesus' ministry and its significance. Your Bible may have what is called a "Harmony of the Gospels" which is invaluable in showing various parallel passages. For example, Matthew records Jesus' temptation in the fourth chapter; Luke in the 4th; Mark in the first chapter, giving it just a summary in two verses - no detail. And in John, this 40-day test is omitted entirely. In my NIV study Bible, the "harmony" follows John's Gospel and precedes Acts.

Now in Matthew, we've had three chapters devoted to Jesus' birth and prophecy, and to his baptism by John. When will we hear from Jesus himself? His ministry is about to begin.

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Matthew 4:1-11: Jesus goes to the wilderness, led by the Spirit, for a time of fasting and testing. At the end of 40 days, when he is hungry and vulnerable, the enemy comes to tempt him. The Devil is in control of this world (1 John 5:19: "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one"), and he is dismayed that Jesus, God's son is here. He wants to defeat Jesus before he gets started. And so he offers him food and power. Jesus answers the devil with scripture and he resists every temptation. He passes the test: we're told that the devil left him and the angels came and attended him. Notice that Jesus quotes Deuteronomy three times. This is the sum of the law; it is Moses' farewell speech and his teaching of a new generation, the ones about to enter the Promised Land, what and *who* their faith rests on. Deut. 6:4 is the creed of the devout Jews (also called the "shema"): "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." God is all in all to a faithful Jew, as he is to a faithful Christian today. Jesus knows Deuteronomy and he quotes it when the Devil, who also quotes scripture, but misquotes it or lifts it out of context, tempts him. (Remember how the serpent in the Garden of Eden asks Eve "did God *really* say you can't eat of this tree?") *Jesus relies on the Holy Spirit's power.* James tells us to "Submit yourselves to God. Resist the

Devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you." (James 4:7-8) Jesus shows us how to do this. Luke 4 tells us that "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, retired from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert." Note that he went "ready for battle," that is, spiritual warfare. We can do much more against the power of temptation when we are "full of the Spirit."

And the writer of Hebrews reminds us that "because he himself [Jesus] suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Heb. 2:18)

One note about **the number 40**: it's a direct tie to other periods of testing: the Children of Israel were in the wilderness for 40 years; Noah and his family endured 40 days and 40 nights of rain. Moses was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights receiving the law from God; the Israelites under Aaron failed their test by creating a golden calf and worshiping it in Moses' absence.

Matthew 4:12-17: Jesus begins his ministry. He's been baptized, tested in the desert/wilderness, and now is ready to teach, preach and heal: he's doing the Father's will, and his actions fulfill prophecy, as Matthew shows us. Jesus begins after he hears that John was put in prison. Perhaps he knew John's ministry was over; it was now his time. John is arrested by Herod (Luke 3:19) because he criticized the king's marriage to his brother's wife. John is eventually beheaded (Matt. 14). Matthew says that Jesus is the light of the world; in John's gospel, Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd, the light of the world, the bread of life, the vine, the way, truth and life, and living water in 7 great "I am" statements. Here Matthew simply quotes Isaiah, showing that Jesus' entrance into public ministry is fulfilling the Father's promise. We also read in this passage that Jesus leaves Nazareth and makes his headquarters in Capernaum at the northwest end of the Sea of Galilee. This was Peter's home town - Peter, a fisherman, lived on the lake. Jesus may have stayed at Peter's house when he was in Capernaum. In v. 17, we read that "from that time on, Jesus began to preach: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." John preached the same message (Matt. 3:2) but John admitted that his baptism wasn't the same as Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:11).

What is the "kingdom of heaven": The simple answer is that it's where the king is, and where the king reigns. Jesus is being shown as the king by Matthew. The "kingdom of heaven" is then where Jesus is - on earth when he's here; in the hearts of believers, and some day, when he returns, earth will literally be his kingdom. His work to redeem us is completed, but the enemy is not finally defeated and punished until Jesus' second coming. In Matthew, Jesus is preaching primarily to Jews who believe that they have the true religion, the law and the system of sacrifices which God gave Moses. They've become complacent. A few are hoping for the Messiah; a few zealots are hoping to overthrow the Romans and put a descendant of David on the throne - a literal kingdom whose seat is Jerusalem. Jesus' message that the "kingdom of heaven is near" is not what they expect. He is not the military king who will defeat the Romans. He is the "suffering servant" whom Isaiah describes. He is the redeemer, the Messiah, but few recognize him.

Remember at Jesus' interrogation by Pilate recorded in John 18, Pilate asks him if he is a king and Jesus says "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place. . . ." And Pilate says "You are a king, then," and Jesus answers: "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." (John 18:36-37)

In his book called *God's Big Picture: Tracing the story-line of the Bible*, Vaughan Roberts, an Anglican priest and author, says God's kingdom is "God's people in God's place under God's blessing and rule." I think that sums it up well.

In the Sermon on the Mount which we'll read next (Matthew 5-7), Jesus speaks of the kingdom and the kind of righteousness demanded of those who are part of the kingdom of God. And in the Lord's

Prayer, also in this section, we're taught "thy will be done, thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." This is a clue that the kingdom of heaven or of God is where God's will is done.

Matthew 4:18-22: Jesus calls disciples including Peter and Andrew, James and John, two sets of brothers who were fishermen in Capernaum, and in business together. Matthew says "at once" they left their nets and followed Jesus. They followed Jesus' call but there's evidence in the other gospels that they already knew Jesus. They'd heard him preach and teach, had witnessed healings, and so when they were formally called, they responded to someone they knew. In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out 12 disciples. A disciple is one who follows; when he sends the 12 out, they become apostles - sent ones. Jesus had hundreds of disciples, but the 12 whom we know as the special band of followers who were with him all three years - from the beginning of his ministry until his resurrection and beyond - are the ones he's calling here.

Matthew 4:23-25: Here we have a snapshot of Jesus' ministry. We see what he does, where he preaches, teaches and heals, and the response of the people. We're told that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Note the sequence: teaching, preaching and healing. It's important, and we'll see Jesus follow it in his ministry.

Matthew 5: The first thing in the sequence is teaching and in chapters 5-7, we see the master teacher at work. The Sermon on the Mount is a sample of Jesus' teaching; he probably gave this sermon, or parts of it, in many of the cities and towns he visited so his disciples knew it well. We see that Jesus' teaching uses several specific devices: repetition, memorable phrasing and a logical organization. Remember he's speaking and he hasn't handed out notes. The people must absorb all of this through their ears. Think of a good preacher who "tells you what he's going to tell you, tells you and then tells you what he told you." And think of Martin Luther King or Jesse Jackson or Barbara Jordan. Their poetic phrases such as "I have a dream" are unforgettable. And that's what Jesus does.

Read Matthew 5 in The Message paraphrase (available at www.biblegateway.com). This Eugene Peterson re-telling of Matthew 5 makes it very clear that Jesus is showing the people a different way of life, a different way of being in relationship with each other and with God.

The Gospel: It's important to say at the start of this sermon that it is NOT the Gospel. The gospel is *the work of Christ* on the cross, his resurrection and ascension. Paul said in I Cor 15:3-4 "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. . . ." That's the Gospel in a nutshell: Jesus died, he was buried, he rose again. Later in this chapter, Paul says "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." (I Cor 15:17) And as Paul says, there were many witnesses to this completed work of Christ. This is what Paul preached all over the known world to both Jews and Gentiles after Christ had returned to heaven and the Holy Spirit came to empower believers. That is the Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is a set of ethical teachings; it is Christ's statement about the established religion and the righteousness needed to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. But it is not the Gospel. We can live by the golden rule; we can be grateful for Christ's clarification of what the 10 commandments mean, but we are not saved unless we believe in what he DID for us on the cross, rising again and returning to the Father.

The Beatitudes: He begins with a series of "blessed are. . ." statements. From the beginning, he uses a pattern: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. . ." etc. The first two statements are related: we cannot come to Christ and believe that he is our savior UNTIL we recognize our own poverty of spirit - our need for a savior. He is not speaking of economic poverty but of spiritual poverty. And when we mourn, grieve, over our condition without a savior, we will be comforted by Jesus' salvation. God's grace reaches out

to us; we accept or reject it. Jesus tells us here that we must be aware first that we need God's grace and the gift of salvation before we can accept it. The next statement, "blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth" has to do with humility. If we're proud of what WE can do, our self-sufficiency, our ability to provide all we need, then we won't recognize our need for Jesus' redemption, God's grace and the Holy Spirit's empowerment to live a Christian life. Moses tells us that he was a humble man (Numbers 12), but we know that Moses was also righteously angry and could be forthright and was useful to God because he knew his strength came from God. That's the kind of "meekness" that Jesus speaks of here. The next "blessed" statement relates to the first two: "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Psalm 42:1-2 expresses this well: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." And Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that "whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14) Unless we are genuinely hungry and thirsty, as a person in the desert longs for water and food, we won't come to God for filling.

The next three "blesseds" are also related: "Blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers. . ." We are merciful when we are shown mercy; we are pure in heart when we are cleansed from sin by God; we are peacemakers when we know the peace of God. These are pleas to be the "real deal" - sold out for Christ, aware of what God has done for us and ready to pass it on to others.

The final "blessed" has to do with persecution and Jesus doesn't mince words: his followers will be persecuted. This is because Jesus is not preaching the "company line" of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He's departing from their oral traditions added to the law; he's preaching a genuine righteousness based on faith in God. He's pointing to the hypocrisy of the established religious leaders, something he will do throughout this sermon and his ministry. He confronts them, and we will see that their anger leads to plots to arrest and kill Jesus. What is our response to persecution? Jesus says: "Rejoice and be glad." Peter tells us that suffering and trials are a part of the Christian life (I Peter 1) and that "these (trials, suffering) have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." (I Peter 1:7) And in the second chapter of this epistle, Peter tells us to "follow in Christ's steps" to emulate Jesus who was insulted, beaten, vilified by his enemies, but didn't retaliate. "Instead, he [Jesus] entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." (I Pet. 2:24)

Matthew 5:13-16: Here Jesus teaches about the law and about our responsibility as people of the kingdom of God. We are to be "salt and light" he tells us: salt to make people thirsty for God and light to point the way to God. And Jesus tells his disciples to "let their good deeds shine" not as a way to earn their salvation, but as an outgrowth of their love for God and their gratitude for HIS gift of salvation.

Matthew 5:17: Jesus explicitly states here that he is not on earth to abolish the law or the prophets, but he came to fulfill both. Matthew makes clear in his OT references that Jesus is the anointed one the prophets spoke of. But the law - those principles laid down in the 10 Commandments (Ex. 20), and then the 613 applications of law which follow in Exodus 21-23, and further clarified in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - that law which the Pharisees and other religious leaders made the basis of their religious life, is fulfilled in Jesus, too. Paul tells us the law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3). Without the law - the principles of living God demands we adhere to - we'd never know we were sinners in need of a savior. Jesus, however, is about to delve into the intent of the law and our motives in keeping or breaking the law.

Matthew 5:21-26: Jesus will use examples from the law to show that he upholds the law. But he also demands self-examination: what does murder start with? He says it's anger, even calling someone an idiot or a fool, for such anger can harden and produce a desire to kill someone. Jesus says avoid that first step. Don't let relationships get off track: "If you are standing before the altar offering a sacrifice to God and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you., leave your sacrifice at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person." We as Christians, as members of God's family and future residents of God's kingdom, must value peace and reconciliation, forgiveness and loving kindness. There's no room for spats and grudges: "You make the first move," Jesus says, "set it right."

Nest week: We'll begin with Matthew 5:27.

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Matthew Chapters 5-8

Review: Last week, we watched Jesus begin his ministry. In ch. 3, he was baptized by John the Baptist, coming out of the water to the Father's approval and the Holy Spirit's anointing. In chapter 4, we're told that the same Spirit led him into the desert for 40 days of fasting and testing. The Devil, the adversary who controls this present material world (1 John 5:19), tempts Jesus physically and spiritually; Jesus resists and passes the test. He returns to Galilee and settles in Capernaum as his ministry headquarters, selects 4 of his 12 disciples, and in Matt. 4:23, we read that he went all through Galilee preaching, teaching and healing.

Sermon on the Mount: This famous set of ethical teachings is collected in chapters 5 through 7 and begins with the familiar "Blessed are . . .for they shall be. . ." series of statements. And we begin to see that Jesus' theme, "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," demands a new set of values for those who are preparing to live in that kingdom, both present and future. Jesus assures the religious leaders and the crowds that he fulfills the law and prophets - his presence as God on earth does not negate either. He shows them, however, that there's more to "do not murder" or "do not commit adultery" besides words: there's motive and intent.

Matthew 5:27: This is an example of part of the law of Moses which the crowd was well acquainted with: "do not commit adultery" is the 7th commandment, but as Jesus teaches, it becomes clear that it is related to the 10th: "do not covet." "Coveting" means to desire so strongly that you want (and mean to have) what someone else has; it's an insatiable desire. And to desire another man's wife is to covet, and that is the first step toward committing adultery. Jesus is also preaching/teaching against lust, and he suggests that if your eye causes you to covet another man's wife, you gouge it out. He is using hyperbole to make a point: let nothing become a barrier to your relationship with God. He's going to teach on prayer in chapter 6, and at its heart, prayer is cultivating an intimate relationship with God. We will find it hard to go to God in prayer when we're coveting someone's wife/husband. Nathan the prophet had to confront David about this (II Samuel 12). Nathan uses the first parable in the Bible to open David's eyes; David repents of his sin, and God forgives him. But David and his family suffer the consequences of his sin.

Matthew 5:31: Here Jesus takes on the issue of divorce, and once again, he gets to the heart of the matter: it's more than just "discarding" a spouse; it's causing someone else to sin in the process that grieves God. And in its most basic definition, divorce is opposing God's perfect will. In Genesis 2, God defines marriage: "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." (v. 24) The two halves of God's human creation, man and woman, are united for a lifetime of growth and development. Jesus knows that divorce is a product of the fall - of sin - and it's been all downhill since. Then in vv. 33-37, Jesus discusses keeping vows, and concludes with the idea that swearing or making vows to do something for another human being or for God is unnecessary if we're authentic members of the kingdom: our yes is yes and our no is no, and no more emphasis is needed. We keep our word. And doesn't this relate to marriage? (Incidentally, Jesus returns to the topic of marriage and divorce in Matt. 19 in answer to a question from the Pharisees. In this

encounter, Jesus says: "Moses permitted divorce as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness, but it was not what God had originally intended.")

Matthew 5:38: Here Jesus quotes the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" principle which God instituted to head off revenge. A punishment should fit a crime and not be an occasion for retribution. Remember Leviticus 24:17-21 or Exodus 22? In both chapters, we read of situations which demonstrate this principle. Jesus underscores it. And he goes further: "go the extra mile," he says. We're children of the king; we should behave generously.

Matthew 5:43: Jesus quotes a saying (not the law) about loving friends and hating enemies which had become popular. Jesus says "love your enemies," flipping it on its head. And he ends with this: "be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." What an order!

Matthew 6:1-18: Three pillars of Judaism - alms-giving, prayer and fasting - are here discussed, and for each, Jesus is turning old teaching into new. His basic message is about motivation: if you give gifts to needy people, do it quietly and out of gratitude for what God has given you. If you pray, do so as a conversation with God, an intimate time of sharing your day, your concerns, your needs, and listening to the Father. Make prayer a time to grow spiritually, not to show others how many church-y words you know. Jesus presents us with a model of how to pray. The Lord's prayer is a very clear outline of (1) the order of our relationship with God (He is our Father); (2) God's holiness, his uniqueness ("hallowed be thy name."); (3) that we are to pray for God's kingdom and his will to be done; (4) then our daily needs, our human concerns follow. And notice that we are to pray for protection against temptation from the evil one. We need strength to resist the devil and to draw near to God; God's strength is available when we ask for it.

As for the third pillar, when you fast, don't let anyone know. Do it because you want to concentrate your thoughts on God - not to be seen as sacrificing a meal for your spiritual health. Jesus concludes this teaching by reiterating once again that "your father who sees in secret will reward you" if the gifts, the prayer and the fasting are done for fellowship with HIM and not for public approval and acclaim.

All of this is the beginning of a confrontation with the religious leaders that will grow as Jesus continues to teach, preach and heal. When he calls the Pharisees hypocrites, actors, he's asking them to ask themselves why they do what they do.

Matthew 6:19-24: Money is a stumbling block, Jesus says; don't serve money, success, a career. Serve God; put him first in your life. "You cannot serve God and money," he says. We see examples of this all around us. We all need a purpose. Jesus says serving God is the highest purpose of human life.

Matthew 6:25-34: Don't worry, Jesus says. Each day's concerns will be met IF we put God first and seek his kingdom. If we're working for God in all that we do, He will meet our needs.

Matthew 7: A number of topics are covered here: criticizing others; seeking God; a statement about "narrow gates and wide paths"; a warning about false prophets; the way to recognize

someone who is truly God's own; putting Jesus' teaching into practice. As Jesus comes to the end of this teaching session, the people are "amazed" because he teaches "with authority." This is Matthew's way of showing us that Jesus - whether teaching, preaching or healing - does so with a manner and a spirit that people instinctively saw a newness in Jesus, a man who knew what he was talking about from experience. He didn't need to quote other scholars; he projected a calm, confident demeanor. Can you imagine sitting on the hillside, captured by his words? John says he IS the Word, the Word of God made flesh. People may not have been able to put a label on what made Jesus different, but they knew that he was.

Matthew 8: Jesus completes his teaching and the crowds know he is not only a healer of bodies, but a man who cares about their spiritual health and behavior, too. The Kingdom of Heaven demands a new kind of behavior. In this chapter and the next, we see Jesus healing different kinds of disease and demon-possession. Jesus gets to work, but don't for a minute think that he's stopped teaching. He teaches all the time: by his deeds (as a role model for their behavior), and through words. He asks us to do the same.

Matthew 8:1: Here we discover that listening from a distance to the Sermon on the Mount is a leper. We learned in Leviticus 13 that a leper must live outside the community. Luke the physician tells us the leper was "full" of the disease, most likely in the end stages. He hears Jesus and knows that Jesus alone can heal him; he has authority. And so he goes to Jesus, defying the law that said he wasn't to get close to people, kneels and asks Jesus to heal him. Jesus touches him! This was probably the first time in years the man had been touched. He was unclean; no one was permitted to touch him; anyone who did touch him was thus made unclean and neither could be admitted to fellowship until they were clean again. Jesus touches him and that alone was healing to his soul. The man is healed bodily, too, and Jesus sends him to the priest to fulfill the law's demands for reinstatement in the community.

Matthew 8:5: A Roman centurion (a captain of 100 men) asks Jesus to heal his servant with a spoken word. The officer knows what authority is and he sees it in Jesus. Jesus marvels at his faith. Jesus grants the officer's request, saying, "Go on home; what you have believed has happened." Note that the man left, an example of his active faith in Jesus.

Homework: If you'd like to do more study in the coming week, here are a couple of questions to answer:

1. At the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he uses a parable to teach principles of kingdom living. Review Matthew 7:24-27. What is Jesus' point? What did it mean to the crowd listening to him near Capernaum? What does it mean to Christians in Carlsbad in 2010?
2. Jesus uses a figure of speech, a metaphor, in Matthew 7:16-20. What is it? Where else does he use it in the Gospels? Paul uses this same metaphor in Galatians 5:22-23. Is Paul talking about the same thing Jesus is? What are the implications for us as Christians as we live in a faith community and in a larger community?

Next week: we'll finish this study of a series of miracles in Matthew 8 and 9, more proof that Jesus is the Messiah, and see Jesus sending his 12 disciples out to minister in chapter 10.

Let's close in prayer.

Notes for Bible 101 - Matthew Chapters 8-10

Review: Isn't Jesus a wonderful teacher? He turns old into new, makes unexpected statements, and if we listen carefully, we can hear his voice speaking to us today. After all, the Sermon on the Mount is for us, too, not just those who sat on the hillside with him 2000 years ago. Visualizing the setting, feeling the breeze from the Sea of Galilee, watching the crowds - older folks, little kids running around and playing tag, the serious Pharisees and teacher of the law, the disciples hanging on every word - it comes to life. And you can do this when you read any passage in Matthew - or any book in the Bible. The Bible is a living text; it is the Word of God and it's the primary way God reveals himself to us.

In the "Sermon on the Mount," we heard Jesus say that we (1) need to check our motives, (2) check our priorities, and (3) "be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect." These are tall orders, and in a sense, this teaching is not a new set of commands. Jesus is saying to the crowds and to us that kingdom living (Jesus theme is "repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand") asks its citizens to be different. The Kingdom of Heaven is not the kingdom of the same old thing; it's not the kingdom of my wants and my desires. It's God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing. We can't expect God to accept our sloppy, careless habits; he comes to transform us. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that we must "follow God's example in everything we do. . . living a life filled with love for others, following the example of Christ." And then he lists several characteristics of behavior which will NOT qualify us for heaven. Instead, he says, we must let the Holy Spirit control us, speaking to each other of God, singing psalms and hymns to each other, making music to the Lord in our hearts, thanking God for everything. But note that all the speaking and singing and thanking follow our being controlled by the Holy Spirit. (Parallel passage Col. 3:16). And we are all given the Holy Spirit as an indwelling presence when we accept Christ (Rom. 8:1-4, 9-11).

We saw Jesus leave the place of teaching and as he did, a leper came and knelt before him asking to be healed. Jesus touched the man, healed him and sent him to the priest. In another incident in Matt. 8, he spoke a word of healing in response to a Roman Centurion's request that Jesus heal his servant. Jesus heals every kind of disease, and we'll see more instances of this tonight.

Matthew 8:14: Jesus and his disciples go to Peter's house and find his mother-in-law ill. Jesus heals her, too, and she got up and fixed dinner for them. That's a complete healing! Later that same evening, Jesus was besieged by crowds of ill people whom he healed. And Matthew says in healing, he's fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would do this, among other things. Isaiah 53 depicts the "suffering servant" who is wounded for our transgressions and by his stripes we are healed.

Matthew 8:18: Jesus is surrounded by crowds where ever he goes, and after a long day of teaching and preaching, he asks the disciples to cross to the other side of the lake - "let's find a quiet place to be alone," he seems to be saying. But he's met by a man, a religious teacher, who says he wants to follow Jesus, and Jesus responds that he has no place to call his own. This seems like an odd response, but Jesus is saying, "don't expect a comfortable life if you follow me; it will be rough and tumble, no regular routine, no three meals a day, no secretary to screen calls: this is life on the move; the kingdom is coming." Jesus begins to tell his followers that there's a cost to discipleship: sacrifice

comfort, sacrifice routine, sacrifice your own priorities. Another disciple wanted permission to go home to bury his father and Jesus said "follow me now." Jesus' answer is not insensitive to family responsibilities. He's saying that there are ALWAYS reasons to put off a commitment to him and his work, but his work must come first. Luke 9:57ff is the parallel passage. Our priority must be the kingdom of heaven; remember he told the crowd in Matt. 6:33 to put God's kingdom FIRST and all our human needs will be taken care of. It's an attitude of faith.

Matthew 8:23: This is a dramatic scene. Remember I said that from the start we as readers know who Jesus is, but it takes the disciples time to understand that he is the Son of God and what that means. They know he teaches and preaches with authority; they know he can heal any disease and cast out demons. Now they're going to see that he controls nature. In the boat, out on the lake, a storm comes up, and it's a doozy. The boat contains several disciples, among them professional fishermen who've been on this lake daily for years. But this is an unusually violent storm and they're afraid. Jesus sleeps through it all. Finally, in desperation and fear they'll drown, they wake him, saying "Lord save us." Jesus gets up and "rebukes the wind and the waves" and there was instant calm - peace that passes understanding. The disciples are in awe, asking "who is this?" They know now that Jesus is no ordinary man. But like us, it takes them time to absorb what they know. We can be told "Jesus is the Son of God" and not know *experientially* what it means until he intervenes in our lives.

Matthew 8:28: When they reach the other side of the lake, they're in the country of the Gadarenes. These are descendants of one of the tribes of Israel, Gad, and look what they're doing - raising pigs, forbidden under Jewish law as unclean for food, and certainly not approved for making a living. In this community are two men whose lives have been destroyed by demons of such numbers that they are violent, and now, they are completely ostracized by the community. When Jesus appears, the demons recognize him and his power. They don't want to lose their "home" in the men and ask to be sent to the pigs. Jesus does so. And notice his command: "Go." Jesus has complete power over the demons. The herd, once peaceful, now stampedes and falls over a cliff into the sea. This outrages the people and they ask Jesus to leave. Do you see their priorities? They care more about their livestock than Jesus. They've seen his power; the once demon-possessed men are calm, restored to a human condition. This does not impress the people who've lost their livelihood. They send Jesus away. And he leaves. Will the Gadarenes regret this? They made the decision that all of us must make: are we with Jesus or not? Do we accept him or not? Remember John 3:36: "Whoever believes in the Son [Jesus] has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." The Gadarenes have rejected the Son - Jesus.

Matthew 9:1 Back in Capernaum, Jesus is teaching in Peter's house, and a large crowd has gathered. It's so big that a paralyzed man's friends can get him to Jesus only by digging through the roof and lowering him through it. Jesus sees the man's inner struggle and says "Son, your sins are forgiven." This outrages the religious leaders who say "Blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins." But Jesus knows what they're thinking and says he can heal the man's physical ailments, too, and he does. Jesus sees what we need and meets our need. For this man, as the leper, his needs were for more than a physical healing: both wanted to be restored to life, and a relationship with God and others.

Matthew 9:9: Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, is here called by Jesus. And then he holds a dinner to honor Jesus and both Jesus and Matthew are criticized by the Pharisees. In the NLT, they ask the disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" Jesus tells them he's come to bring sinners to

repentance - and that he can't do much for those who think they don't need to repent. We must be "poor in spirit" and "hunger and thirst for righteousness" for Jesus to come to us with forgiveness and acceptance.

Matthew 9:14: Disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus and ask about fasting. (Notice the chronology of this visit: it follows Jesus' dining at Matthew's house). Jesus isn't opposed to fasting, but he suggests that there are appropriate times to do so, and further, that he brings a new way of thinking. Thus he compares his teaching to a new wineskin.

Matthew 9:18: In this passage, there are two healings that show Jesus' concern for everyone of any age and rank. First a leader of the synagogue asks Jesus to restore his daughter to life and on the way to his home, a woman touches Jesus' garments in faith. The woman has suffered from bleeding for 12 years; the little girl who's died is 12 years old. Both are given back their lives. In both cases, Jesus responds to a request for healing, though the woman's request is just a furtive touch. It's important to recall in Leviticus 15, the laws about discharges that made a person unclean. A woman was unclean during her monthly period, but after a cleansing ritual, could return to fellowship and worship. This woman had been bleeding for 12 years; it wasn't natural and her ritual uncleanness excluded her. She was isolated; just as the leper (Matt. 8:1) was living without human touch, so was she. She was "dead" because of her affliction, and Jesus healed her.

Matthew 9:27: Jesus heals two blind men who call him "Son of David," a title for the Messiah. And he heals (v. 32) a man who's been made mute because of a demon. Jesus casts the demon out and the man can speak again.

Matthew 9:34: the leaders question Jesus authority: is his power from God or the devil? They believe the latter. Notice that no one questions *whether* he can do miracles; what they question is the *source* of his power. In another passage, Jesus tells them that their logic is flawed: a devil casting out devils doesn't make sense.

Matthew 9:35: As this chapter closes, we see Jesus' compassion for humanity whom he sees as "sheep without a shepherd." He could be describing our society today. He tells the disciples that the harvest is great and the workers are few. This is a verse many missionaries use to recruit. But it tells us that God sends those who do the harvest of souls. We can't all be Billy Graham, but we can all pray for workers.

Matthew 10: Jesus sends his disciples out to heal and cast out demons. They are now apostles - sent ones. This chapter represents a transition. Up to now, Jesus has been preaching, teaching and healing. Crowds follow him everywhere and will continue to press in on his time and space. Now Jesus looks ahead to his return to his Father, and he initiates the disciples into ministry. He spends quite a bit of time preparing them not only for this assignment, but for the future, after his resurrection, when it will be their job to spread the Gospel - to make known the work Jesus did on earth.

In Matthew 5, he tells his followers to rejoice when persecuted, and in chapter 10:16, he warns them that persecution is part of what they will experience. It's guaranteed. But he assures them that the words they need in any situation (if the work they're doing is for God) will come from God, and this is

a journey of faith as much as of action. There is a cost to following Jesus. He mentioned this in ch. 8; now he explains in more detail: Jesus divides families, communities. His is a radical message - now as well as then. Those who follow Jesus today are thought of as kooks and worse. Why? Because Jesus doesn't teach the conventional way. The cross was not what the Jews expected of the Messiah, but it was God's way. And when we sign on as Jesus' followers, we have to "take up our cross" and "lose our lives to find life." It's a paradox in human terms, but salvation in God's terms.

Next week: We'll begin with chapter 11 and more revelation of who Jesus is.

Homework for those who want to go a little deeper:

1. Why did Jesus say he hadn't come to bring peace? (Matt. 10:34) What kind of peace is this? How does God define the peace that Paul describes as "passing all understanding" (Phil. 4:7)? Look up the Hebrew word "shalom" and find its many meanings. (At www.biblegateway.org you can search for words like "peace" in scripture and in dictionaries and concordances).
2. Of the healings in Matthew 8 and 9, which seems most significant? Why? Read the parallel passages in Mark and Luke to gain further insight into these miracles.

Let's close in prayer.

Notes for Bible 101 - Matthew 11-13

Review: Last week, Jesus' ministry made a transition. From teaching and healing, he turns to expanding his ministry by calling 12 disciples who will travel with him and become the core who spread the Gospel after Jesus returns to the Father. He multiplies himself by commissioning them to go out to heal and cast out demons. Are they apprentices? Interns? Jesus calls them apostles, and he tells them that his coming is not for unification; it is not for political gain. No, he's on earth to stir up thinking and to provoke people to make a decision about God: "the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" and those who hear this message must "repent," turning from their old ways to God's ways. Jesus presents them with a new set of values, a new perspective; it's a message designed to shake everyone who hears it from complacency.

Matthew 10 pictures the disciples going out AFTER Jesus instructs them and tells them not everyone will welcome them - but they don't welcome him, either. And Matthew 11 begins with Jesus going off to preach and teach; recall that at the end of Matt. 9, Jesus had said "the harvest is great but the workers are few." Jesus doesn't waste time back in Capernaum waiting for the 12 to return; he gets to work, too.

Matthew 11:2: John the Baptist is in prison (Herod has arrested him because John told him living with Herodias, his brother's wife, was a sin, and Herod (and Herodias) didn't like hearing the truth (Matthew 4:12; Mark 6:17-20). Now John, who's known Jesus all his life, sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if he's the Messiah. John's got a little doubt; Jesus isn't behaving as John believes the Messiah will. Jesus isn't organizing a force to overthrow the Romans. Jesus tells John's deputation to report what they've seen. Jesus, the Messiah, is fulfilling what Isaiah 35:5-6 prophesied. And then Jesus praises John as a great man but says those in the kingdom are greater. What does he mean? That John died under the OT terms; Jesus has come to bring a new covenant and will offer a new means of salvation.

Matthew 11:13: Jesus looks at the prophets of whom John was the last, saying "listen": you've had the Word of God and you've rejected its truth. He condemns the hypocrites once again, and condemns those in cities who have seen his miracles but have rejected him. "Woe to Korazin and Bethsaida," he says. He's warning all who hear him, all who watch him heal and cast out demons: it's not enough to just "watch" and walk away. Jesus' message as John's before him was one of repentance. Turn from the old and follow God; turn from your sins and accept forgiveness. Decide."

Matthew 11:28: Jesus concludes this chapter with an invitation to come to him for rest. The OT is full of promised rest, but the chosen people do not enter the rest because of their disobedience and rebellion. Jesus offers a chance to a new generation under a new covenant to find rest in him. He speaks in paradoxical terms: my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Matthew 12:1-8: Jesus and the disciples are challenged by the religious leaders for "working" on the Sabbath. Walking through a grain field, they pick kernels and eat them, action interpreted as "harvesting" by the Pharisees. This is a form of work forbidden on the Sabbath (Lev. 23:3; the Talmud scholars identified 39 different types of work, the first three of which are sowing, plowing and reaping), but Jesus declares that he is "master of the Sabbath" further provoking the religious establishment. He reminds them of David and his men eating the Tabernacle's consecrated bread,

but does so by challenging their knowledge of the OT saying "haven't you read," knowing that of course they've read this scripture. But their interpretation is narrow and picky; Jesus is not rejecting the law, he's simply suggesting that there are times to be merciful, too. Recall in the 5th chapter when he goes to intent and motivation when obeying the law. The Pharisees and Scribes have added burdens to the people and are more concerned with keeping the law than obeying and pleasing the one who gave the law - God.

Matthew 12:9 illustrates mercy. The Pharisees see a man whose hand is deformed in the Synagogue; Jesus enters and knows that on the Sabbath, he'll be criticized for healing the man. But he does - and does not do it quietly. In the process, the Pharisees become so enraged they "call a meeting to discuss plans for killing Jesus." Jesus is becoming a problem. He's not conforming to their ways; he's challenging them and they are worried. The confrontations will continue to escalate until Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane by the Temple guard sent by these members of the religious establishment.

Matthew 12:15: Jesus escapes from his critics, but crowds follow him. He continues to heal but asks those healed to say nothing. Why? He's not afraid, but he's not the Messiah they are expecting, and he knows they're thinking about making him king by force. He rejects this in favor of Isaiah's "suffering servant" image of the Messiah (Isaiah 42:1-4). Jesus' work is NOT military or political; God's plans are not man's plans. From the Passover in Egypt to the Jesus's teaching, preaching, healing, and on to the cross, God's plan is for a "lamb of God" to be sacrificed for the sins of the world. Jesus is that lamb. He fulfills God's plan of salvation.

Matthew 12:22: His enemies watch as he heals a demon-possessed man both blind and mute. The crowds are amazed but the Pharisees accused Jesus of being empowered by the devil and not God. Jesus uses logic to refute their commentary. And Jesus goes on to condemn them, saying "every sin or blasphemy can be forgiven - except blasphemy against the Holy spirit which will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come." And what is "blasphemy against the Holy spirit" - the unpardonable sin? It is stifling the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin and failing to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. In other words, Jesus died for you and men; it is the Holy Spirit's task to make us conscious of our sin and thereby, our need for a savior. If we consistently reject this prompting of the Holy Spirit to accept the sacrifice Jesus made for us, he will leave. We will have grieved him and we will be left in our sins. Jesus made this clear in John 3:36: "all who believe in God's son have eternal life. Those who don't obey the Son will never experience eternal life, but the wrath of God remains upon them." Paul said in II Cor 6, "we beg you not to reject this marvelous message of God's great kindness. For God says 'At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.' [Paul quotes Isa. 49:8] Indeed, God is ready to help you right now. Today is the day of salvation." And Paul exhorts us not to grieve or stifle the Holy Spirit (I Thes.5:19)

Jesus continues to confront the Pharisees; he doesn't back away from them nor does he compromise his message. He tells them to consider their fruit (are they bearing fruit for God?) and second, to be ready to account for their lives on judgment day. Since they believe themselves to be super righteous, they are unmoved by his indictment.

Matthew 12:38: Now the Pharisees demand a sign. This is ironic; they've been watching him heal and cast out demons. What kind of sign do they need? We can see just how closed-minded they are. Jesus

has given many signs of his identity as the Messiah. John's Gospel uses such "signs" as evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. John writes in ch. 20:30-31: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." What is the sign Jesus announces to them? Jonah. Jonah was the prophet who refused to go to Ninevah to preach and instead, went the other way. He ended up in a fish's belly for three days and three nights - exactly the time Jesus spent in the tomb. Both were brought back to life. That's the sign, Pharisees. Jesus resurrection will prove he is the Messiah. And remember what Paul says in I Cor 15:3-7, 12ff. "If Christ was not raised then your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." The resurrection to new life is essential to the plan of salvation.

Matthews 12:46: Jesus true family, he says, is made up of those who believe: "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus is not harshly rejecting Mary and his siblings; he's expanding his family to include all of us who believe he is the Son of God. Paul explains this in Gal 3 and 4. Through Christ, we are all made sons of God and thereby, heirs according to the promise (the promise to Abraham).

Matthew 13: The parable of the soils is a familiar one and it illustrates Jesus' use of what was around him and familiar to the people to teach truths to them. Parable means "thrown along side" - it's a new way to see an old truth. The seed is the word of God and the soil represents the different kinds of hearts. The Pharisees who asked for a sign in the previous chapter are the hard soil, the hearts unprepared to receive Christ.

Next week: we'll study the rest of ch. 13 and its parables, moving on to ch. 14 and 15.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Read the book of Jonah and decide why Jesus would choose this story as the "sign" the Pharisees requested in Matt. 12:38-41. Who is "greater than Jonah"?
2. Are there Pharisees today? Who are they? What sign would convince them of Jesus' message?

Let's close in prayer.

Notes for Bible 101—Matthew 13-17

Review: We've seen Jesus fulfilling Matthew's summary of his ministry in Matt. 4:23: "Jesus traveled throughout Galilee teaching in the synagogues, preaching everywhere the Good News about the kingdom. And he healed people who had every kind of sickness and disease." And last week, we noted that the big question for everyone Jesus encounters is "who is this man?" The disciples ask it when he calms the storm; they know he's not like them. The 12 disciples have put their trust in Jesus; they believe in him, but they're not quite sure if he's the Messiah or not. Others respond to his miracles with amazement, but put no faith in him as Savior. The Pharisees and others who openly oppose his ministry, challenge Jesus on Sabbath rules, on the source of his miraculous power, and finally we read in Matthew 12:14 that the "Pharisees met and discussed plans for killing Jesus." Each person Jesus encounters must answer THE question, and each does in his/her own way. We also must answer the question. Is Jesus the Messiah? Is he the Savior? Is he OUR savior? The answer requires faith.

As we continue in Matthew, we'll see clearly that all of Jesus' activities - teaching, preaching, healing - prepare him for the cross. This will become more and more obvious in his conversations with his disciples, in his teaching the crowds, in his confrontations with the opposition. He knows the reason the Father sent him; others are only beginning to understand.

Matthew 13: This chapter contains 7 "kingdom" parables. A parable, so the old definition states, is "an earthly story with a heavenly message." And in answer to the disciples' question about why he tells stories like this, Jesus explains in Matthew 13:11 "The knowledge of the secrets [or mysteries] of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." Parables are designed to reveal truth, to illuminate truth - truths known to us, but so familiar that we don't hear them any more. Jesus' parables are designed to wake people up, but in his answer to the disciples, it's apparent that he knows not everyone will hear, not everyone cares, and not everyone will dig below the surface of the "good story" to the truth it reveals.

The parable of the soils (Matthew 13:3-23) is a familiar one and it illustrates Jesus' use of what was around him and familiar to the people to teach truths to them. The seed is the word of God and the soil represents the different kinds of hearts. The Pharisees who asked for a sign in the previous chapter are the hard soil, the hearts unprepared to receive Christ. The next parable about the weeds among the wheat is related; the seed in both is the Word of God, the Gospel, being preached (scattered) and what happens to it. The mustard seed, too, has to do with the Gospel's growth. The parable of the yeast is trickier: while the first three have to do with the seed being cast out and either landing on good soil and producing fruit, or being sabotaged by the enemy, the word of God will produce results. The results simply differ just as human response does. But yeast is always a symbol of corruption in the Bible. In Exodus and Leviticus, it's an emblem of sin. Here Jesus is saying that while good comes from the Gospel's preaching, the enemy is present and will corrupt when and where he can. Hence the weeds sown in the field with the good seed; the yeast also begins slowly to grow, but when it is fully developed, corrupts the whole loaf (church, individual heart, etc.). Jesus point seems to be that we as individuals control the results with the Holy Spirit's help: if we're open to the Gospel and the Holy Spirit's nurturing of the seed planted, our lives will produce fruit. But if we stray, allowing corrupting elements in, our lives will be hurt and even destroyed.

Three other parables follow (Matt 13:44-52): the hidden treasure, pearl and net. The first two highlight the value of the kingdom; Jesus said in Matthew 6:33: "Seek first the kingdom of heaven and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" ("all these things" refers to clothes, food, other necessities of life). The kingdom is so valuable that it must be a priority in our lives. The third parable, the net, shows fish of two kinds, and the fish stand for human beings. At the judgment, those who are righteous in God's sight will enter his kingdom; those who are not will be discarded.

Matthew 13:53: The end of this chapter shows Jesus visiting Nazareth, the town where he spent the first 30 years of his life. The people cannot believe "the carpenter's son" is the Messiah and the chapter ends with this sad statement: "And he [Jesus] did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Matthew 14: Here Jesus is told of John the Baptist's death (vv. 1-12), and he mourns. He tries to get away by himself; crowds follow him to the other side of the lake and there he has his usual compassion on them. He may bark at the Pharisees, but he always has time to reach out with healing and loving teaching to the crowds who seek him. The difference is that the Pharisees (and others who oppose him) have closed their hearts to his message; the crowds are still open to him.

Matthew 14:15: Here is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible: Jesus feeds thousands (5,000 men plus women and children) with five loaves and two fish. Notice that they are filled; leftovers are collected. This alone is worth attention. Jesus feeds us, soul and body, with all we can hold and more.

Matthew 14:22: Another dramatic scene follows the feeding of the crowd. Jesus sends his disciples back across the lake without him. He needs time to pray, to talk with the Father. He's mourning his cousin's death and the cruelty of Herod. In the middle of the night, he walked out to the disciples - crossing the lake, on foot, on the water. The disciples thought they were seeing a ghost, and Jesus speaks to them saying "Take courage! It is I." What a wonderful greeting, and it's one that we can hear in our fear and discouragement. God is always with us, and when we cry out for his help, he answers. Peter boldly tells Jesus "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water," and Jesus says "come." Peter begins confidently, his eyes on Jesus, but when the wind and waves are his focus, he sinks. What does this tell us? The old song "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace" says it all. When our eyes are on Jesus, we're safe; his power is ours and our problems slip from sight. When our eyes are on our problems, we sink.

Matthew 15: Jesus is once again confronted by the Pharisees over a matter of the law and Jesus minces no words, calling them hypocrites. Their talk and walk do not match and Jesus calls them on it.

Later in this chapter, at vv. 21, Jesus is besieged by a Canaanite woman. She is a Gentile, and Jesus tries to brush her off, but she will not let him go without healing her daughter. Jesus' conversation with her seems cruel because he calls her a dog; she, in her humility, answers him "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table," and Jesus sees her faith and heals her daughter.

Matthew 15:29: The chapter ends with another miraculous feeding of thousands with seven loaves and a few fish. This is a second occasion of feeding the bodies and souls of a great crowd. Jesus meets their needs just as he meets ours, and in both of these "dinners on the grounds" as the Southerners say, the people are fed abundantly. The disciples collect baskets of leftovers. Why does Jesus do this more than once? He can. And for us, it's a double lesson: what we have is multiplied when it's given to Jesus. On our own, our talents and our gifts are minimal, but when Jesus takes them and blesses them and gives them back, we can serve him with more than we ever thought possible. Both scenes also picture communion: Jesus breaking bread, blessing it and distributing it, foreshadow the last supper and the institution of Holy Eucharist which remembers Jesus' gift of his body and blood for us.

Matthew 16: The Pharisees and Sadducees, watching Jesus like hawks, ask for a sign (they'd done this in ch. 12 and his answer was "Jonah"). Now Jesus repeats "Jonah, and says, in effect, "the signs are there; you are misreading them, avoiding them or missing them altogether."

Matthew 16:5: Now begins a very important incident in the life of the disciples. They take a trip with Jesus across the lake and then on foot to Caesarea Philippi, north by several days' walk from their destination on the eastern side of the lake, perhaps Bethsaida. They walk together, talking, mulling over the things they've seen and the things Jesus has said. They ask Jesus questions, and he, once they reach Caesarea Philippi, asks them "who do men say that I am?" This is a turning point in their lives and in his ministry. For two years, the disciples have watched Jesus heal, cast out demons, feed thousands of people, pray and preach. Now he's pointing his face and his journey toward Jerusalem and the cross; he needs to confront them as he's confronted the Pharisees with a decision: are you for me or against me? He knows they believe in him, but he wants them to understand (1) who he is and (2) what his purpose is. At first, they all speak, saying "some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah. . ." The public identifies Jesus as a prophet. And then Peter, the voice of the group and its obvious leader, replies: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter has said that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus tells him God has revealed this to him and that on this confession of faith, Jesus will build his church. But once again, Jesus says "don't tell anyone I'm the Messiah."

Matthew 16:25: Now for the first time (and Jesus repeats it twice more), Jesus tells them he's going to Jerusalem to die. Peter is shocked and tells Jesus "Never," but Jesus replies that Peter is a "stumbling block" to God's purpose with talk like that. The disciples will need time to absorb this because they've been unclear about whether Jesus is the Messiah, and if so, when he'll establish his kingdom on earth. Now Jesus says "that's not why I came." It's going to take time for this new mission to sink in.

Matthew 17:1: Another dramatic incident follows Peter's confession of faith. Jesus takes Peter, James and John, up a mountain and there, Jesus is "glorified" or transfigured. His body and appearance are changed completely; the Greek is "metamorphosis." To the three disciples' total amazement, Elijah and Moses are with Jesus. Peter, wanting to preserve this moment, says "let's build three shelters" but a voice interrupts - and it's God's voice: "this is my son; listen to him!" God has a way of cutting away all the distractions and junk, shining his spotlight on where we need to simplify: don't get caught up in busy work. Listen to Jesus; concentrate on him. Jesus tells the three disciples to say nothing about this special revelation until after he rises from the dead.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Who do YOU say Jesus is? Think about your answer and if you say "the Messiah" what does that mean? If Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world, is he savior in your life? Why must we answer this question?
2. Jesus twice feeds great crowds with very little. Why does he do this? What does he hope to teach the crowds about God? What does he want the disciples to understand about him and about God's work in the world?

Next week: We'll cover Matthew 17:14-22.

Let's close in prayer.

Notes for Bible 101—Matthew 17-21

Review: We saw Jesus hard at work last week. He feeds thousands of people, heals dozens of sick and hurting bodies, reaches out to comfort and heal even a Gentile woman, and in contrast to the crowds who are amazed by Jesus, the Pharisees continue to watch and challenge him.

Jesus, too, ministers to his disciples, and takes them much deeper into his confidence. In Matthew 16, he asks them "who do men say that I am?" and Peter makes a confession that all of us must make: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." And Jesus begins to show them that his identity as God's son, the Messiah, means: he's going to die, but rise again. And God allows three of the disciples to see Jesus in his resurrected or glorified body on the Mount of Transfiguration. And then Jesus goes back to work. But in his ministry - and in his disciples' lives - a turning point has been reached, and they've changed direction. They're headed for Jerusalem.

Matthew 17:14: From the mountain top (the Transfiguration experience) to the valley, everything changes. When Jesus, Peter and John come down to the valley, they're greeted by a man asking healing for his son, and saying "your disciples couldn't do it." Jesus says "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you." Jesus has shown them by example, and by delegating authority, that healing is of God; they, too, can heal using Jesus' name. But their faith is still small, and Jesus tells them privately that even small faith can move mountains. And then he repeats his prediction of the future: he's on his way to Jerusalem to die (v. 22-23) and the disciples begin to grieve.

Matthew 17:24: Paying taxes is miraculous in Jesus' hands. A fish with a coin provides the necessary temple tax for Jesus and Peter. Is there anything Jesus cannot do?

Matthew 18: This chapter contains a variety of teaching and it begins with children. Perhaps Jesus needed a pause from the adults and their confusion, and he sets a child in front of him and teaches about the simple faith of such a child. It's the kind of faith all of us need. He moves to the parable of the lost sheep, then a lesson about confronting sin, and teaching on prayer. The chapter ends with another parable about forgiveness. Jesus makes it clear all through the Gospel, either by implication or direct teaching, that forgiveness is essential to those who would live in God's kingdom. In the Lord's prayer, we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matt. 6:12) and then as a coda to the prayer, Jesus adds "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." (Matt. 6:14), and here he returns to that theme with a story. A master forgives a servant a huge debt - one he'd have had to work a lifetime to repay, and even a lifetime may not have been sufficient, the debt was so large. The man, now free of debt, goes out and grabs a friend who owed him a sum so small it was pocket change by comparison to the fortune his master had forgiven him. The friend asked for patience; the forgiven man said "no," and put him in jail. His attitude got him punished - his debt is reinstated and he's tortured and jailed. His lack of forgiveness when he'd been forgiven so much is reprehensible; Jesus tells us that God has forgiven us a debt we cannot pay and it is our obligation, through gratitude for what God has done, to forgive others.

Matthew 19: Jesus heals crowds of people, and in the midst of these signs of his divinity and his mercy, the unmerciful Pharisees come to him with a question about divorce. In the Sermon on the

Mount, Jesus mentioned divorce (5:31-32) in a section on the law. Jesus reaffirms the law that Moses gave, but suggests that motivation is important: why do we do what we do? Now in ch. 19, he answers the Pharisees' question on divorce by returning to God's original intention: one man, one woman joined for life to become one. Questions continue: aren't there loopholes in this? Aren't there good reasons to split? Jesus cautions them to be careful.

Matthew 19:13: Jesus blesses children, and then a young man asks Jesus "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' answer to the crowds in John 6:28-29 is instructive here. They ask "what must we do to do the works God requires?" And Jesus answers "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." This young man in Matthew 19 wants to DO something, to work for his eternal inheritance. Listen to Jesus reply: "obey the commandments." The man asks "which ones," and Jesus lists the last six - the commands that have to do with our relationship with other humans. The young man says he's kept all of them. Then Jesus says "go sell your possessions and give to the poor," and the young man went away. The wealth the young man had was where he'd placed his belief: the belief that should have been in God's son. In this way, Jesus shows how possessions and talent and our own achievements can get in the way of our humble, childlike faith in him as our savior, our strength and our all in all.

Matthew 20: The parable of the vineyard and the workers is one which helps us see that God's ways aren't our ways. A vineyard owner hires workers all day long, and at the end of the day, regardless of whether the worker has worked one hour or ten hours, each is paid the same wage. The workers protest, but the owner says, "I've paid you what I agreed to pay you; it's my privilege to pay all the same." And he adds: the last shall be first and the first will be last." This is kingdom teaching, too. No matter when we believe - as children in Sunday School, or as old folks in a nursing home, if we genuinely place our faith in what Jesus did for us, we will be given eternal life.

Matthew 20:17: For the third time, Jesus predicts his death. What's the disciples' response? They show they're still thinking the Messiah will become king, not a crucified servant. James and John's mother goes to Jesus to ask for privileged places in the kingdom; Jesus answers "they are not mine to give." Imagine how Jesus must feel! He wonders, sincerely, if they'll ever "get it." And he asks them "can you drink from my cup?" and they assure him they can. But they don't understand that he must suffer. (Of the 11 who are faithful to Jesus (Judas, the 12th, betrays him), 10 die martyr's deaths. Only John lives to old age and dies a natural death.) Jesus adds: "If you want to be great, you must be a servant." Remember he told them in Matt. 10, that a student is not above his teacher, and a servant not above his master. He is a servant to them and to his Father; he is their example in humility and service, just as he is our example. Paul tells us in Phil 2: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Jesus humbled himself and so must we.

Matthew 20:29: Two blind men ask Jesus, the Son of David for sight. Jesus, leaving Jericho with his disciples, is on his way to Jerusalem for Passover and the last week of his life. The blind men recognize him as the Messiah; he touches their eyes and heals them. He's never too busy to help those who ask him for help.

Matthew 21: Jesus is now in the last week of his life, and it is a roller coaster ride. He begins with acceptance and acclaim of crowds in Jerusalem saying "Hosanna to the Son of David." A few days later, he's before the Sanhedrin being convicted of heresy; he faces Pilate and Herod, and is

condemned to death - not because he's done anything against Roman law, but because the crowds demand it. The same crowds who welcome Jesus on what we call Palm Sunday are now provoked to ask for his death. But the ride into Jerusalem is memorable, triumphant, and in his disciples' minds, they must be thinking "he won't die; he's going to take over this town!"

Matthew 21:12: Jesus enters the Temple once he's in Jerusalem and instead of basking in the adulation of the crowd, he confronts the Temple authorities. He drives out the money changers, tips over the animal cages, shouts at them that they've desecrated the Temple, his Father's house. Do you see that Jesus is on his way to death? He will fulfill God's plan of salvation. Crowds continue to come for healing and he heals them.

Matthew 21:18: Jesus spends the night in Bethany (the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary) and on returning to Jerusalem, curses a fig tree, and turns it into a lesson about faith. Jesus' time with the disciples is now very short; he uses every opportunity to teach and reinforce what he's told them.

Matthew 21:23: Now the aftermath of the day before plays out. Jesus is confronted by the Temple authorities wanting to know who gave him permission, that is, by what right did he do what he did to their business. Jesus asked them a question, and because they knew they'd condemn themselves with their answer, they refuse to answer, so Jesus refuses to answer their question. It's a standoff. Why don't they arrest him? Jesus is still popular with the crowds, and the city is jammed to the walls with pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Passover, and a very significant Passover it is. The faithful, having calculated the passage of time according to Daniel's prophecy about the Messiah, think this may be the year. (If you want to understand this dating process, go to www.logosmin.org. Click on "Logos Quarterly," and in the Winter 2003 issue, click on "Good question." It will take you to Bill Creasy's explanation of the Daniel 9 prophecy and the reasons why Jesus is considered the Messiah by the throngs.) The Temple authorities do not want to start a riot, so they wait for a better time.

Matthew 21:28: Two vineyard parables follow with Jesus once again reiterating themes of obedience and trust in God. If Israel had believed the prophets and had trusted God, they would not be under Roman rule; instead, the coming of the Messiah would be hailed as a triumph. Jesus encounters some faith and belief, a lot of doubt, and outright opposition.

Next week: we'll continue to see Jesus on his way to the cross, beginning with Matthew 22.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Of the many parables in this section (Matthew 18-21), which is most relevant to Christians today? Why?
2. Why does Jesus confront his enemies? Why doesn't he stay in Bethany? In what ways is his bold, determined behavior a lesson to his disciples? To us?

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Matthew Chapters 22-25

Review: Last week, Jesus entered Jerusalem after numerous confrontations with the Pharisees and Sadducees. The crowds in the city welcomed him without reservation. Once there, Jesus goes to the Temple and angrily throws out the businessmen; this makes getting rid of Jesus the religious leaders' first priority. They're plotting his death in earnest now.

Jesus continues to teach and heal. He is the Messiah that Isaiah pictured 700 years before it occurred: "And when he [the Messiah] comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer and those who cannot speak will shout and sing." (Isaiah 35:5-6) Later he will be the Suffering Servant that Isaiah also describes: "He was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed. . . From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins - that he was suffering their punishment. He had done no wrong, and he never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave." (Isaiah 53:5, 8-9).

Matthew 23-25 constitutes one unit known as Jesus' final discourse (his first was the Sermon on the Mount, ch. 5-7), and at least part of it was given on the Mount of Olives.

As a matter of interest, he begins his preaching and teaching ministry with "blessed are. . ." and ends with "woe to. . ." But before we get to that discourse, we have another chapter with parables and questions.

Matthew 22: Jesus tells another story, this time of a wedding banquet. He points to the wedding banquet of the lamb which John's vision in Revelation describes. He also is saying that everyone will be there - Gentiles as well as Jews.

Matthew 22:15: The Pharisees are now trying to trap him into saying something for which he can be arrested under Roman law. So they ask him about taxes: should they support Caesar? (Recall that in ch. 17, they'd confronted Peter and him about their Temple tax; now they're upset about the civil taxes). Jesus answers by using a coin: Caesar's image is on it, and he says "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Jesus eludes their trap.

Matthew 22:23: The Sadducees now question Jesus about the resurrection. Since they don't believe there is a resurrection, it's another trap. But just as Jesus has been able to answer the Pharisees with skill and logic, so he answers this group of religious leaders. He tells them point blank: "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." This hits them where it hurts; they take pride in their knowledge of scripture. Jesus is confronted in public and the crowds marvel at his answer.

Matthew 22:34: Now the Pharisees return, this time asking Jesus to distinguish the greatest commandment. These are the people who try to adhere to 613 laws - plus the oral tradition! How shall Jesus choose? He says "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." In essence, he says, if we love God, everything else follows. (Remember "seek first the kingdom of heaven?") And Jesus paraphrases the great Jewish Shema found in Deut. 6:4-9 which states: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and

with all thy might." How can the Pharisees answer Jesus now? He's quoted to them the heart of the law, the creed they recite at the beginning and end of each day. So Jesus asks them a question: "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" Jesus isn't letting them off the hook; they reply "the Son of David." And Jesus quotes Psalm 110 to them that David calls his son Lord; the Pharisees are speechless.

Matthew 23: This chapter is entirely Jesus' words (if you have a red-letter Bible, it's solid red). This chapter is often called the "woes" because Jesus condemns the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees whose pious and slave-like devotion to the law has made them self-righteous and unreachable with Jesus' message. Jesus speaks of them to the crowds in Jerusalem knowing that the religious leaders are watching.

He begins his condemnation of them with this statement: obey what they say, but don't follow what they do. Their walk and talk don't match; they don't practice what they preach. He says they're hypocrites in every way: they practice their religion for show rather than as a way of worshiping God.

Matthew 23:13: In this section, he says they're stumbling blocks to others. Their "leadership" has led others astray and will keep both them and those who follow them out of heaven. Several times in this passage, he calls them blind guides, a term he used in ch. 15. Frequently, he says "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites!" Jesus is no wimp; he's not hiding from them. He could easily stay with the crowds, healing them and comforting them. But instead, he lashes out at those who, he says, are like "whitewashed tombs." They look good but inside they're dead.

Matthew 23:37: Jesus ends the chapter with an elegy: he grieves for the city of Jerusalem. The famous "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have wanted to gather you as a hen protects her chicks" statement is here. Jesus is mourning what might have been: forgiveness and salvation are within the reach of all who have heard him, but their unbelief will keep them out of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 24: In this chapter, once again, most of the words are Jesus. But this time, he's not speaking of the past (the Pharisees' ancestors were just as much in error as the present-day group; they'd rejected the prophets of their time when God had offered forgiveness over and over). Now he's predicting the future, both the immediate future when the Temple is destroyed (70 A.D.) and the distant future (the end of the age and his second coming). The Temple is symbolic of the religious establishment and it, too, is destroyed (centralized Temple worship has not resumed to this day in Jerusalem).

Matthew 24:3: On the Mt. of Olives, Jesus sits to teach his disciples. The Mt. of Olives is within sight of the Temple of which he's just been speaking. The Garden of Gethsemane is on the Mt. of Olives - and this garden of olive trees, a grove, supplied the oil for the Temple. The disciples once again have come to Jesus for an explanation (as they did in ch. 13 when they wanted an interpretation of the parables). This time, they've got questions about when the destruction of the Temple Jesus predicted will occur. They also ask about the end times and signs that will tell them they're IN the end times. In the disciples' minds, the destroyed temple equates to the end of the world as they know it.

Matthew 24:4: So Jesus begins to tell them about the end of the world and what they/we can expect. A list of conditions runs from those claiming to be the Messiah to rampant sin to the time when the Gospel will be heard in every part of the world. And then Jesus says, v. 14, "finally, the end will come." I wonder if the prediction about the spread of the gospel, "so that all nations will hear it," involves mass media such as TV, radio and the Internet. If so, we're fast approaching that time.

Then Jesus refers to Daniel's prophecy about the desecration of the Temple, specifically, in the Holy of Holies, the place only the High Priest enters, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). This may have already occurred twice; first when Antiochus IV Euphianes in 168 B.C. desecrated the Temple; the second time when the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 AD. (see footnote on 24:15, 16 in NIV study Bible). A third temple is to be built, and it, too, may be desecrated, the final desecration is likely to be the antichrist setting himself up as God, demanding to be worshipped. Natural disasters and wars will be common, Jesus says, and it won't be a good time to be a pregnant woman or a nursing mother, "a time of greater horror than anything the world has ever seen or will ever see again. In fact, unless that time of calamity is shortened, the entire human race will be destroyed. But it will be shortened for the sake of God's chosen ones." (vv. 21-22)

Matthew 24:26: Jesus warns them not to be deceived by news headlines and reports of the Messiah in the desert or somewhere else. He says when he returns in great glory, his second coming, the whole earth will KNOW it. It will be dramatic; the signs in the sky will be unmistakable. It won't be hidden. Jesus will come for those who have remained true to him, both living and dead, on that "great, getting up morning," as the spiritual says.

Matthew 24:32: Jesus gives them a parable, a metaphor: when the fig tree exhibits certain signs - leaves, buds - you say "soon, we'll harvest figs." So it is with Jesus: watch for the signs he's mentioned, and you'll know the end time harvest is near, and Jesus will return.

Matthew 24:36: Jesus gives them another analogy: Noah's time. In Genesis 6:5, God tells us that "all the thoughts of all the people were wicked all the time," and God is so sorry he's created humans, he decides to destroy all except Noah and his family. That's what Jesus refers to: the end times, the times just before he returns, will be described in that way: "All the thoughts of all the people are wicked all the time." How close are we? Jesus says "only the Father knows when this day will come." Jesus reminds them that in Noah's time, the ark, which took Noah 100 years to build, convinced no one that a flood was coming. So it will be at the end times: people's hard hearts, their own priorities, their own pleasure, will take precedence over doing God's work and being conscious of their need for God. And the "son of Man, Jesus, will come when he's least expected." Everyone will be going about their business as usual.

Matthew 24:45: The chapter ends with Jesus telling the disciples and us that we are to be faithful and watchful. He uses the servant analogy: a faithful servant is ready for the master's return - no matter how many days or weeks he's away; a servant who takes advantage of his master's absence to neglect the master's business and the master's command, will be caught in his disloyal state and be punished. The punishment for those of us who are unprepared for Jesus' return is eternal separation from God.

An aside: Those to whom Jesus spoke these words took them to heart. All through the NT epistles, one has the sense that the early church believed Jesus' return was imminent. Their lives were affected by this knowledge that Jesus would return unexpectedly, or as Paul puts it, "like a thief in the night," and so, they had to be constantly prepared. (1 Thes. 5:2).

Matthew 25: Two parables continue Jesus' discussion of the second coming: first, the parable of ten bridesmaids (five wise and five foolish) and then the story of three servants. In each case, Jesus is comparing the various attitudes and behavior of those who believe and are prepared for Christ's return, and those who are unprepared.

Matthew 25:31: Jesus until this time has reserved his judgment, his harshest words, for members of the religious establishment: the hypocritical and self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law. Now he broadens his judgment to include the whole world. The early church was almost entirely Jewish for the first few years. Paul's ministry, however, was primarily to the gentiles, and the gospel spread throughout the Mediterranean world in the first generation of believers. Jesus in a sense has already predicted this in ch. 24:14, and here again, his inclusion of the whole world on the day of judgment means that all of us are responsible to make a decision to accept or reject Jesus, the savior of the world. At the great judgment, the sheep and goats will be separated; in ch. 13, he refers to the good and bad fish in the net and the wheat and weeds which are separated at the harvest.

Righteous believers, those who put their faith in Christ as redeemer, not only believe, they act, Jesus says; they serve him, and he pictures this in vv. 37-46 of this chapter.

Next week: we'll study Jesus last days on earth, his death and resurrection.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Read Paul's words of encouragement in I Thessalonians 5. What do they imply about the Thessalonians to whom he writes? What do they say to us? Note in particular I Thes 5:16-22. Paul is always practical. How can putting Paul's instructions into action change our attitudes and our lives?
2. What is Jesus' tone of voice in Matthew 23? Do you think he's grieving all the way through the chapter? If so, for whom is he grieving?

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Matthew Chapters 26-28

Review: Last week, we saw Jesus complete his public ministry and leave the Temple. He's about halfway through the week culminating in his death on the cross. He spends a lot of time with the disciples (ch. 22-25), instructing them and preparing them for the (1) temple's destruction in 70 A.D., and (2) the end times events which precede Jesus' second coming. He warns them and us to be ready; parables of the wedding feast where five wise virgins were prepared contrast with the five foolish virgins who were unprepared. His second coming will be "like a thief in the night," Paul tells us, so we are to be ready and waiting with anticipation - eager to see him return for us who believe in Him as Lord and Savior.

Matthew 26: Jesus and his disciples prepare for the Passover supper (held on Thursday of his last week), and at the same time, his enemies are plotting his arrest and death. The religious leaders meet at the house of Caiaphas, the high priest. They want to avoid arrest during Passover because they fear the people will riot (thousands of pilgrims are in Jerusalem for Passover).

Matthew 26:6: Jesus is in Bethany at the home of Simon, having dinner there, and a woman anoints his head with perfume. The disciples are indignant; in fact, John says it's Judas who's most upset because of the waste of money which could have been used to help the poor. John in an aside says it wasn't because he cared for the poor, but the money (John 12:6). Telling, because in the next scene, Judas is with the leading priests agreeing to betray Jesus for a price. Jesus defends the woman's act saying "she has prepared me for burial," further reinforcement of what he'd told them earlier about his death, burial and resurrection.

Matthew 26:17: the disciples consult Jesus about the Passover meal, and he tells them where to find the place where they'll celebrate. Here they have a final meal together, what we call "the last supper," and which is the first time we see Holy Eucharist. Jesus also tells them one of them will betray him and when Judas asks if it's he, Jesus says "you have said it yourself." Scripture predicted this in Psalm 41:9.

Matthew 26:26: Here Jesus takes bread, thanks God for it, breaks it and shares it with them saying "this is my body." He takes the cup and blesses it, giving it to them with the statement, "this is my blood which seals the covenant; it is blood poured out to forgive the sins of many."

In this scene, we see Jesus recalling the first covenant God made with his people in Egypt (Exodus 12) : if God's people killed a lamb, used its blood in place of their own, the death angel would pass over them. God delivered them from Egypt and their enemies by the blood of a lamb; now the new covenant is being sealed by Jesus blood. He is the lamb of God John the Baptist recognized in John 1:29. Jesus completes God's plan of salvation; he fulfills prophecy (first mentioned in Gen. 3:15) in his death. At the end of the meal, Jesus says he won't drink wine with them until he does so in heaven. This is the 4th cup of wine to be consumed at the Passover meal. He's had three cups with them; the fourth is in the future.

Matthew 26:31: Jesus predicts his arrest and their desertion. Peter declares that he'll never leave Jesus, but Jesus says that very night Peter will deny him three times.

Matthew 26:36: Jesus takes the 11 remaining disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane and asks them to be with him as he prays. Here he's speaking with the Father, asking if the cup can be removed from him (the cup he'd asked James and John if they could drink in Matt. 20). Remember, Jesus, while fully divine - that is, fully God, is also fully human. He cannot help but fear and dread what's ahead: the pain, the suffering are intense. He knows it. And then he prays ""not my will but thine be done," "the prayer that always works" according to Fr. Tim in the Mitford books. We also can and must pray for God's will and not our own. We pray "thy will be done" in the Lord's Prayer every week; do we mean it? Are our wills fully surrendered to God's will as Jesus was? This may have been Jesus' greatest struggle in the process of fulfilling the Father's plan of salvation.

Matthew 26:47: The temple guards come to arrest Jesus; Judas kisses him and they arrest him. Peter, defending Jesus, takes a sword from one of the soldiers and strikes out. He cuts off an ear; Jesus heals the man and tells Peter to put his sword away. (It's not Peter's sword; he's a fisherman. But note his courage; he's ready to die for Jesus." Jesus yields to his arrest saying "this is happening to fulfill the words of the prophets," and all the disciples flee as Jesus is led away.

Matthew 26:57: Jesus is taken to Caiaphas's home where the Sanhedrin has gathered. Peter follows the crowd and joins it in the courtyard. Inside the house, Jesus' accusers are looking for two witnesses to agree on Jesus' blasphemy. (Remember under Jewish law, two witnesses are needed before a person can be convicted and/or condemned). Two were found who said Jesus said "I am able to destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in three days," sufficient evidence for the Sanhedrin that Jesus had blasphemed God. Jesus of course was referring to his body as the Temple of God, and the chief priests and their cohorts in sentencing Jesus to death were fulfilling Jesus' own prophecy. The priests are upset at Jesus calling himself God, too, and they say he's guilty and must die. They begin to beat Jesus.

Matthew 26:69: Outside in the courtyard, Peter is confronted about who he is: is he a follower of Jesus or not? Peter denies it three times, and on the third occasion, the rooster crows and Jesus' words come back to Peter. He leaves weeping bitterly.

Here's a man who just hours before vowed to follow Jesus anywhere, and even used a sword to defend Jesus, preventing his arrest. Peter lost his courage, but not his faith. Jesus had said "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to have all of you, to sift you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen and build up your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny him; Jesus prays for the strength of his faith. With Jesus praying for him, his faith did not leave him.

Matthew 27:1-14: Jesus' trial continues, this time in front of Pilate. He's been in front of the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, and they've condemned him as a blasphemer. But they can't put him to death; for that, they need the Romans. While Jesus is being questioned by Pilate, Judas realizes that he's made a big mistake: "I've betrayed innocent blood," he tells the chief priests, and tries to return the money. They refuse to return it to the Temple treasury because "it's blood money." Instead, they use it to buy a field to bury foreigners. Judas goes out and hangs himself.

Matthew 27:15-26: Here Pilate offers the crowd a choice: Barabbas or Jesus (traditionally, Pilate releases a prisoner at Passover). Barabbas was convicted of insurrection against the Roman

government (Mark 15:7). Barabbas's name, curiously enough, means "son of the father," Jesus' true identity. Barabbas is released, guilty of the crime with which Jesus is accused, and Jesus is innocent.

Matthew 27:32-55: Now Jesus, sentenced to death, is beaten and led to the crucifixion on Golgotha. This sentence, so short, contains unimaginable pain, suffering, torture - all endured by Jesus on our behalf. He willingly lay down his life for us - the spotless, sinless Lamb of God. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God." (II Cor. 5:21)

Matthew 27:57: Friday evening is when Sabbath begins; Jesus is dead. Joseph of Arimathea, "who himself had become a disciple of Jesus," went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. He buried it in his own tomb with Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" watching.

Matthew 27:62: On Saturday, the intrigue continues: the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate to ask for a guard at the tomb saying "while he was still alive he said 'After three days I will rise again,'" and they're afraid that his disciples will steal the body and claim a miracle. Pilate tells them to post a guard and they seal the tomb.

Matthew 28: the tomb is empty; Jesus is alive. Women go to the tomb and discover that Jesus is not there and an angel tells them "do not be afraid. . . come see where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: He is risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee." And the women "hurried away from the tomb, afraid, yet filled with joy." What a surprise! What joy! They'd experienced the worst week of their lives, and now, they're given the greatest news they could ever hear: Jesus, the one they thought dead and gone, is alive.

Matthew 28:11: While the women are hurrying off with their good news for the disciples, the guards reported to the chief priests that Jesus' tomb is empty. They devise a plan, bribing the soldiers to tell everyone that Jesus' body was stolen during the night. (Roman soldiers who went to sleep on duty would be killed; it's hard to believe they'd agree to participate in such a plot).

Paul tells us in I Corinthians 15:3-8: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." Paul is writing this in 54 A.D., or 20 years after the resurrection. In Acts 1, we are told that Jesus "showed himself to the apostles and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." The period between the resurrection and his ascension into heaven was 40 days; the Holy Spirit came 10 days later, falling on the apostles who'd waited for his coming in Jerusalem. Paul and Luke (the writer of Acts) make it clear that Jesus' resurrection and appearances after it were factual events, not fiction or myths made up by his followers.

Matthew 28:19-20: Jesus' last words to his disciples and to us are in the form of a commission, a command (not a suggestion): "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."

Our next study: will return to the OT and take up Exodus.

For those who want to go deeper:

1. Pamela Rosewell Moore says of the last command of Jesus that it's "no go, no lo." In the King James Version, the verse reads: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." What Moore means (incidentally, she was Corrie ten Boom's companion and nurse for the last few years of Miss ten Boom's life) is that until she was willing to obey the command and step out on faith, helping to spread the gospel, she didn't know the last part: "lo I am with you always." We have to act. What do you think? What's your response to the Great Commission? (Moore's book on this topic is *Safer than a Known Way*.)
2. Who is responsible for Jesus' death?
3. How does Jesus' death and resurrection fulfill God's plan of salvation?

Let's close in prayer.