

SOUTHLAND CHURCH

THE GOSPEL OF  
**MATTHEW**

*29 Day Devotional*



**foundations**  
daily devotional



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CHURCH

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Versions of scripture quotations are noted.

**DAY 1****INTRODUCTION**

The Book of Matthew, it has been said, is a book written **by** a Jew, **for** the Jews, **about** a Jew. Matthew was a Jew who became a disciple of Christ. He was also a tax collector. This put Matthew in a tough position with his people. At the time of Christ Rome was in charge of Israel and therefore taxes had to be paid to Rome. However, the Romans didn't want that job, so the position of tax collector was given to Jews. The tax collectors would bid for the job and whoever won the bid would get the "privilege" to collect taxes. They could tax the Jewish citizens – their own people – for everything. There were typical taxes for emergencies, roads, wheat, wine and transportation. But there were also taxes for anything with which the tax collector could come up. It was not unheard of for a tax collector to stop a pedestrian going home from the market and charge a tax for what they were carrying. The tax collectors would have to give what they had bid to the Romans. Anything above and beyond this was their income. It's no wonder the Jews hated the tax collectors! They were being gouged by their very own people!

Matthew, the tax collector, became a disciple even though he was likely hated by his own countrymen. Yet Jesus, a Jew, appointed him as one of his core. This book is his perspective on the life of Jesus.

Because of Matthew's Jewish heritage, faith and culture, he was well-versed in the knowledge that he, along with every other Jew, was waiting for the promised Messiah. Matthew spends much of this book explaining and proving to the Jews how Jesus truly is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He wants them to accept the truth that Jesus is the Messiah that they have been waiting for. For this reason, many of the parables, explanations, and examples may seem unusual as we don't have the benefit of a Jewish culture to help us interpret them. However, through the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, every word in this book was also written for us today, to help us understand the Deity of Christ and the greatness of His salvation.

Finally, the coming of Jesus, Matthew emphasizes, is the coming of a specific type of kingdom. Throughout this book, the leader, values and rules for this kingdom are declared. As children of the King of this kingdom, we would do well to pay careful attention to what is said.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. In today's world there are people who are considered 'the least of these' like the tax collectors of Jesus' day were considered. Ask the Lord to bring a few people to mind who are often pushed aside or not treated with value. Ask Him to give you His heart for them. Spend a few minutes praying for their blessing. Take a few minutes to ask the Lord if there's anything He would have you do to make sure they have access to the gospel – the good news about Jesus.
2. Ask the Lord to speak to you about the truth of Jesus as a Jew. Ask Him if there is any hesitation in loving Him because of His race. Ask Him to grow in you a love for Him as a Jew, but also for His people.
3. Take a few minutes to pray for the blessing and protection of the Jewish people and the nation of Israel. Specifically, if you personally know a Jew, pray for their blessing, and that they would come to know Jesus as Messiah before returns.

**DAY 2****READ:** Matthew 1

Matthew begins his gospel with a very important piece of information: the genealogy of Jesus. This is critical to all Jews if they are to believe Jesus really is the Messiah. They knew that the Messiah had to be in the line of David in order to be *the* King whom they were waiting for. Lines of ancestry are really important to the Jewish people and so Matthew takes time to fill in many names so every Jew can see that Jesus really does belong, by blood and by birth.

However, the Holy Spirit does not leave out the Gentiles in this genealogy either! In this list there are the names or references to a few people who were born Gentile: Rahab was from Jericho and part of a nation that were archenemies of Israel. Ruth was from Moab. It is possible that Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite man, could have been Hittite as well, but of this we can't be sure.

The interesting thing about these Gentiles in the genealogy is two-fold. First: it's interesting that they are mentioned at all because they are women. Typically Jewish genealogies only list men. But in this case five women are noted: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. Their inclusion helps shift the thinking of the Jews to understand the value that God places on women. The second reason is because not all of them are Jewish. The Jews were very particular about the purity of lineage. So the fact that Gentiles are in the line of Jesus show us God's plan is very grand and includes any who turn to Him in faith. For example, Rahab and Ruth chose to follow the God of Israel. By this fact, they are just as much part of the pure lineage of Jesus as those who were born Israelites.

This gives us our identity today. Whether we are Jew or Gentile, when we give our hearts to the Lord and choose to follow His ways, our entire identity is changed. Although God was careful to have a legally pure lineage for His Son Jesus, He lets us know through Matthew that there are others who have spiritual rights to be in that line as well. As believers, this includes us.

Near the end of the chapter, two names are given to the Son of God: Immanuel and Jesus. Immanuel literally means "God with us". This speaks to the fact that now, in the person of the baby born to Mary, we have the very nature of God in human flesh. That baby grew up, lived, died and rose again and is **still** Immanuel: God with us. The other name He was given was Jesus. Jesus is another form of the name Joshua. The meaning is "God who saves". Even as we call on the name of Jesus we are reminding ourselves we are speaking with the God who saves... and is still with us.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Spend time thanking the Lord for allowing all people from all races to enter into a new identity with Him through faith.
2. Spend some time thanking God for the value He places on women. Ask Him to give you the name of a woman or girl you can pray for today who needs to know they have value in Christ. Spend a few minutes praying for her.
3. Thank God for the truth of His character revealed in His names. Thank Him for being with you and for saving you by His name. Ask the Lord to reveal to you how being Immanuel (God with us) or Jesus (God who saves) can make a difference with a struggle you have right now. Pray about your situation with this in mind.

**DAY 3****READ:** Matthew 2

In this chapter we read about the wise men finding Jesus after He was born. They had seen a sign in the sky. As wise men, they were trained to watch the stars, rotations and movements of planets, stars and all kinds of heavenly bodies for all kinds of information. They were the astronomers (some might argue that they were astrologers) of the day. Magi, or wise men, studied stars, planets and other heavenly bodies to navigate, predict weather, teach science, and many other things. They also studied all kinds of prophecies and writings in the hopes they would be able to understand and predict more. These were the educated men of society.

It makes sense then that when they saw something unusual happen in the skies they immediately understood there was a significant thing happening. The specific sign they saw meant to them, according to what they had been taught, that a king would be born. However, this sign was so spectacular it couldn't be a *normal* king. This was going to be a big-deal-kind-of-king. If they didn't already know the Scriptures, they at least knew where they could look. Everything they saw in the sky was confirmed in just one verse. (They quoted Micah 5:2.)

They then travelled for a long time, possibly as much as two years, to find the baby. From possibly *one verse* and the signs in the sky they took great risk, bringing costly gifts to a baby born in a stable. When we see this we must acknowledge one thing: the signs in the heavens were the fulfillment of a prophecy so great that even those who once didn't believe became worshippers of the One True God.

It's not just the magi who took action on just one sign from God. Joseph did the same. When the magi left Bethlehem there was no way for Joseph to know that Herod had issued a decree for the death of all boys aged two and under. But God gave Joseph a dream. Just one dream. According to this chapter Joseph didn't even wait until morning to talk it over with Mary and see if his nightmare might have been indigestion, or if he was interpreting it correctly! No! He just got up in the middle of the night and with intense urgency they packed up their things and left while it was still dark.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. How does the Lord usually speak to you? Some hear Him best in nature, others through Scripture, or circumstances, or song, or words/thought/pictures in their heads, or dreams, or words of godly counsel, etc. Thank Him for speaking to you. If you struggle to hear Him or know when it is God speaking to you, don't worry! He promises that those who love Him will hear His voice. Spend a few minutes asking Him to remind you of a time when He did speak to you and you obeyed or recognized Him. (Remember, conviction of sin is also God speaking to you! If nothing else, thank Him for speaking to you about your sin so you walk in repentance and life.)
2. Ask the Lord to speak to you - how willing would you be to obey as radically as the Magi and Joseph did, bringing you cost and sacrifice? Confess any cynicism or skeptical thinking that keeps you from hearing or obeying what you hear from Him. Ask Him to grow in you a heart that is eager to obey when you are sure you hear His voice.
3. Thank the Lord for using people outside the Jewish faith to help fulfill His prophecy (the Magi). Thank Him for how intricately and powerfully He orchestrated the announcement of the birth of His Son to the governing bodies of the day. Thank Him for literally moving the stars in the heavens as a sign of the birth of Jesus. Then spend some time thanking Him for the signs He has given us of Jesus' second coming as well, and ask Him to prepare our hearts to recognize those signs when they happen.

**DAY 4****READ:** Matthew 3

This passage on baptism portrays a few interesting points. Up until this point, the Jewish faith didn't practice baptism, per se. They practiced ceremonial washing. Whenever they were considered unclean for any reason, a time of cleansing had to pass which ended in a very specific kind of bath. This bath was a symbol that they were again considered clean. The Hebrew word for the cleansing bath is 'mikveh' and means 'a gathering of water'. The water had to be deep enough to completely immerse the whole body. Over time, mikveh had come to be understood as 'immersion bath' because of both the meaning and requirement. Mikveh was carried out during times of cleansing, but also was considered necessary when someone wanted to join the Jewish religion.

When John the Baptist came along, this idea of immersion, or cleansing bath, was not unusual for the Jews of the day. When John was baptizing though it wasn't for physical cleansing, as the Jews were used to. This time it was a *spiritual* mikveh: they came confessing their sins and they were baptized. John's baptism was symbolic of the cleansing that could happen on the inside.

The baptism John offered was very specifically for those who had repented. John told the Sadducees and Pharisees that they couldn't be baptized. This must have been so offensive to them! They were the religious leaders, yet they couldn't participate in the spiritual cleansing? No. John said it was because this baptism is a sign of the spiritual cleansing that comes from repentance. It is not the baptism itself that cleanses – unlike a mikveh bath. They couldn't fake it on the outside and still be clean on the inside. The baptism is a sign of the cleansing that has already taken place. Someone who goes into the water for baptism must have already confessed their sins and repented.

John goes on to talk about another baptism that was still to come in the future: The baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. When the Holy Spirit came initially, He came with tongues of fire and filled those who had already committed to following Jesus. Water baptism was a public declaration of repentance and also a sign of conversion. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is also a sign of conversion, but this is a sign given by God, not by man. In the end of days there will be another baptism of fire. This baptism will also be a cleansing fire and a judging fire.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Think for a few moments about your own baptism or the baptism of others you know if you haven't been baptized. How did that symbol of confession and repentance impact you?
2. According to Jewish religion (and now Christianity as we follow in the steps of Jesus) baptism is a sign of conversion to the faith. If you have not been baptized, ask the Lord to speak to you about whether or not you have confessed and repented and are ready to make that commitment of obedience to publicly choose Christ as your God. If you have been baptized, ask the Lord to speak to you about continuing to live a life of genuine confession and repentance.
3. First came the baptism of external cleansing (mikveh). Then came the baptism symbolizing internal cleansing (water baptism by man). Then came the baptism of the Holy Spirit (the filling of the Holy Spirit by God). Ask God – are you walking in the power of the Spirit? Ask Him – where are you grieving the Spirit?



**DAY 5****READ:** Matthew 4

This chapter begins with an attack of the devil. Let's take a look at what we can learn.

First let's note that satan tempted Jesus after he had been fasting and praying. There's a lie we sometimes believe that says 'the more time I spend with God, and the more I fast and pray, the less I'll be tempted.' Jesus' life is our example so we can say with certainty that praying and fasting will *not* always keep the devil away.

However, the second thing we must notice is that fasting, praying, and knowing the Scriptures helped Jesus fight against satan. Every time satan attacked Jesus with a temptation or accusation, He fought against it with Scripture. He used the very words of God – which satan knows full well – to resist the power of satan.

Thirdly, it's after 40 days of fasting that Jesus is tempted. And He is tempted by the very things he's starving for first... food! This is a reminder to us that when we are weak we must be on guard. When we're tired, hungry, or mentally, spiritually, emotionally, or physically weak we become an easy target for satan. Knowing this, it would be wise to be prepared by having friends support us in prayer, having Scriptures memorized and taking care of ourselves before making decisions that could affect our eternity negatively.

Jesus did not send satan away at the first sign of his appearance. In the typical western church there would be one of two reactions to temptation. Either we don't believe satan exists to tear us down, or we believe we need to send him away at the first whiff of his horrific presence. Jesus did neither. He recognized the temptations were from satan. But not until the third temptation did Jesus say, "Be gone, satan!"

Let's be clear: satan is not a welcomed guest at any time! Neither should we ever entertain any of his temptations or lies, just like Jesus didn't. However, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of believing that God always wants us to chase him away at the first sign of trouble. It's possible that God wants to strengthen us for spiritual warfare or demonstrate His glory and power by coming to our aid. Whatever the reason, our first job is to **resist**. And then, having planted ourselves as warriors equipped by the Word and the Spirit, to send satan scurrying with God's power and strength, not fear and trembling.

This passage also tells us of the calling of the first few disciples. It is unclear exactly what was said when Jesus called them. However, it is clear that they didn't hesitate at all. They followed. They left their careers... in the middle of the day. They left their investment (the boat and all their fishing gear) behind and followed Jesus. How willing are we to leave behind everything to follow Jesus?

Verse 20 speaks directly to parents. Zebedee, James' and John's dad, was in the boat when they were called to be fishers of men. The boys left dad in the boat. Dad was left without his helpers. In his older age he didn't have the men around he had hoped to have. He had likely been grooming them for this their whole lives... and they walked away in one conversation. This is an example to those among us who are parents. When we see the hand of God in the lives of our kids do we eagerly, and with our blessing, let them go even if it was never in our plan or vision? Or do we hold them back, challenging them to think about it just a little more, and consider the cost and what they'll lose? We would be wise to learn from Zebedee – the dad who didn't hold back the purpose of God in the lives of his sons.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you evaluate whether or not you are developing strength in the Word, in prayer and in fasting so that you can be strong against the temptations of satan. Ask Him what steps you can take to grow even stronger in these areas?
2. How well are you taking care of yourself to protect against the attacks of satan? Do you have a supportive group of friends you are willing to call on when temptation strikes? Are you memorizing the Word so you are ready to fight with power? Ask the Lord for direction on how to build in these areas so you are more prepared to fight the enemy.
3. Ask the Lord to speak to you about whether or not you fight satan with fear and trembling or with power through the Word and His Spirit. Ask Him to give you a word, thought or picture of His power in you as you resist satan together with Him. Ask Him to give you a heart of courage as well as determination to prepare for the battle.
4. For Parents: Ask the Lord if you have given your adult children the blessing they need to follow God according to how He calls them. If you haven't, confess this to the Lord and ask Him for words of blessing for your kids. If your children are about to leave home, ask the Lord to give you His view of them and to move your heart to trust Him to lead them, love them, rescue them and redeem their mistakes for His glory. If your children are still young, ask God for wisdom and strength to train them to be willing to follow God.

## DAY 6



### READ: Matthew 5

Matthew 5 begins the famous Sermon on the Mount. In order to understand this sermon well, we must remember Matthew is writing to Jews. Not only is Matthew writing to Jews, Jesus is speaking mostly to Jews, but also to Gentiles as they were part of the crowds that were gathered to hear Him speak. As you read through this sermon, ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten your heart with the message He wants you to understand.

In every topic Jesus covers in this sermon, He raises the standard. He usually begins with, "You have heard that it was said...". This means you have been taught through an interpretation of the Scriptures or through tradition. Then right after that Jesus tells them what was meant by the Law in the first place. Each time it refers to the heart rather than just to actions.

On the topic of **anger**, Jesus said that they had heard murder was wrong. Of course they had! Do not kill is one of the commandments! However, Jesus now sheds light on what this really means. He says holding anger in our heart, or calling someone names with evil intent, or even holding a grudge is really the issue. The heart of the matter is when our relationships with others are broken and we contribute to that brokenness with attitude, words or actions. It gives us new eyes to read the commandment 'Do not murder'. Instead of thinking, 'I'd never do a thing like that!' we are now guilty of breaking this commandment every time we hold a grudge or unforgiveness in our hearts.

Jesus does this again with the topic of **adultery**. He says in the ten commandments 'Do not commit adultery' and 'Do not covet your neighbour's wife'. Again, it's an issue of the heart. We don't have to actually commit the physical act of adultery to sin; just having a heart that thinks about illicit relationships is enough to condemn us. Whether it's looking at pornography or fantasizing about someone who's not your spouse (real or imagined) it's

the same as adultery in God's eyes. The issue of purity is one of thought and heart. Actions reveal what's in the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made it clear He will be judging not **just** our actions, but also our hearts.

**Oaths** or promises are another issue Jesus raised. In those days, it was understood that if they swore on a deity (on God or any of His names, for example) the oath or promise was binding. But they thought if they swore by something else, like heaven, or the hair on their head, etc. that it wasn't binding. This way they could get away without keeping their promises if they changed their mind. Jesus told them their oaths were just as binding as if they had sworn by God's name because God Himself made the heavens and owns them. God is the one who put the hair on our heads. The point Jesus is making is not really about what we swear on at all! Again, it's a matter of the heart. He is telling us we need to be sure that when we say "yes" or "no", we will follow through. Our character should be such that our word alone holds the weight of an oath or a contract.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask the Lord to speak to you about the three things in today's reading (anger, oaths, adultery). Ask Him to show you if you have any sin to confess in any of these areas. Then ask Him if there are other things in the chapter He wants to highlight for you as areas you need to confess. In obedience, confess them as sin, and ask God to give you a pure heart.
2. Spend some time in thanksgiving for the forgiveness God so willingly pours out when we confess and repent. Thank Him specifically for freedom in the areas you confessed sin.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your spiritual eyes as you go through your day to the situations that come up that reveal a heart that is not pure or free from sin. Ask Him to give you a sensitive spirit to recognize His conviction and immediately repent.

## DAY 7



### READ: Matthew 6

The Sermon on the Mount continues in this chapter and as before, deals with heart issues.

Verse 16 has a very important word: when. The verse says: **When** you fast... It doesn't say "if" you fast. Jesus' assumption here is that His followers would fast, no questions asked. This section, therefore, has two things to teach us. The first thing is that fasting must be a regular part of our spiritual practice. If we are not already fasting on a regular basis, it would be wise to start. Traditionally, fasting means to not eat food. However, food fasts are not the only kind of fasts listed in scripture. Daniel fasted from lotions (or cosmetics). He also fasted from animal products and rich foods and wine. Some fasts require no liquids or food. And another fast in the Bible talks about fasting from sex. We need to inquire of the Lord what kind of fast He wants us on if we are unable to do a food fast for any reason. Even with severe health issues, there are still any number of things one could fast from.

The other thing that stands out in verse 16 is **how** we should fast. Literally it says to wash your face and put oil on your head. In Jesus' time, people didn't bath or shower every day, or even every week. However, they did wash their faces and do their hair. To do their hair they would put oil on it. This served to protect the hair from the elements, helped to style it, and often was a kind of oil that would keep insects out of the hair as well. So if we were going to interpret Jesus' instructions for today, it might be something like: take a shower, do your hair, put on your make-up (or shave) and don't let your appearance look like you are fasting. Put another way: do what you always do. The heart of the matter is not that we

look good when we are fasting, or that we severely change our ways, but that we are not drawing attention to ourselves and our suffering. Fasting is hard. That's part of the reason we do it. However, if we're getting our egos and confidence stroked when people feel sorry for us, or congratulate us on our fasting, we have missed the whole point and our focus is on the praise of man, not the glory of God.

Verses 25-34 are about worrying. Each one of us has at least one thing that worries us. Some of us have so many things that worry us that we can't count them! However, the Lord uses this passage to remind us that He is in control. He is sovereign. He loves us more than He loves the birds. So if we really, truly trusted His love for us... and if we honestly believed in His sovereignty... we would be able to freely live without worry because He is more than able to care for us with beauty and abundance.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Do you have a regular spiritual discipline of fasting? If not, ask the Lord how He wants you to begin to implement this into your life. If you do, ask Him if there are any changes He wants you to make to your current fast.
2. What kinds of things do you do to draw attention to yourself either in prayer or fasting (or anything else) that could potentially be robbing you of eternal reward? Ask the Lord to open the eyes of your heart to see your true motives and actions in this regard.
3. What is worrying you right now? Ask the Lord to speak to you in words, thoughts or pictures about how His sovereignty and love can take care of every single detail. Thank Him for His glorious provision.

## DAY 8



### READ: Matthew 7

In verses 13-14 Jesus talks about the wide gate and easy way as opposed to the narrow and more difficult way. Jesus recognized that each person listening would have been familiar with the gates and roads around Jerusalem. The main roads were wide and had a significant gate allowing many people in at once. Security would be more difficult to ensure, therefore it would be the easiest way for anyone to enter the city. Narrow roads on the other hand would be more difficult to navigate. They were more likely to have thieves. Often they were uncared for and were in disrepair, so travel could be hazardous. Gates were often so narrow only one person could pass through at a time. Merchants would have to unload and abandon everything off their carts or go around to a larger gate. They were too small to bring baggage through.

For Jesus to say getting into heaven meant taking the narrow gate *and* difficult way is significant. The people would understand the risk involved. Following Jesus wouldn't be about making life easier, but getting through the difficult things in order to enter eternal life. They also would've had a mental picture of going through alone. Faith suddenly became a personal thing. They couldn't get through as part of the whole Jewish community or the family they came from.

Verses 15-20 gives us clear indication of how we can be sure someone is a believer. Not only does this passage tell us what to watch for in others, this passage is also a warning for each of us. If we don't produce good fruit then we will be cut down and thrown into the fire. The diseased tree produced diseased fruit. The good tree produced good fruit. The fruit gives us the indication of what is on the inside. If we want to produce good fruit, we have to be good on the inside. This is a critical teaching! Many times we work hard to

produce good fruit – we serve, we volunteer, we give, we do, do, and do some more to look like we’re producing good fruit. However, if we’re not producing fruit from a heart that is fully engaged with God, restored and made whole by Him, there is no possible way to produce good fruit. Jesus was not speaking to the crowds about fruit as much as He was about the wholeness they could find in Him that would bring about good, healthy fruit. We will be judged by our fruit and that fruit will not be good unless the very core of who we are has been transformed by Christ.

The very next section in this passage, verses 21-23, speaks about those who do a lot of things for God, but don’t have a relationship with Him. There is a sense among many that Christianity is really about following the rules and doing the right things, even following a formula of sorts. We do devotions and we don’t cheat on our spouses or our taxes. It’s easy to begin to feel like Christianity is a religion based on works... even though we say we are saved by grace. Yet this passage is so clear that Christianity is actually based on relationship. We can **do** all the right things, but unless we listen to God, like Jesus listened to His Father, we won’t know if we’re doing the right things. We need to be in a relationship with Jesus that is dynamic. He will speak, we will listen and respond. This is His deepest desire: relationship. And those who don’t have that relationship will not be recognized as His friends at that moment when everything is revealed.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. What are your expectations about being a Christian? How have you prepared yourself to walk the narrow or difficult way? Ask Him if there is excess baggage you are carrying that you will have to lay down so you can enter through the narrow gate. (This could be material goods, emotional baggage, or relationships, etc.) Ask the Lord to give you a word, thought, or picture about how He will be with you as you navigate the narrow road. Ask Him to speak to you about how worthwhile eternal life will be once you have successfully entered that narrow gate.
2. Ask the Lord to reveal to you whether or not you are producing good fruit or diseased fruit. Ask Him what steps you need to take in order to become more healthy and whole on the inside so that your fruit is also healthy and whole. Ask Him if you should book an appointment for personal ministry or visit with your cell leader or pastor, or spend extended time with the Lord.
3. Ask Jesus to give you a picture, word or thought about how He sees your relationship with Him. Are you so focused on doing things for Him that you forget to listen to Him so you can obey Him? What steps does He want you to take to grow your relationship?

## DAY 9



**READ:** Matthew 8

In this chapter we find a key principle to live by. This is a principle, not a directive. Some have taken these very passages and taken them as personal, and even general instruction, rather than what they were: words of Jesus to a specific person.

In the first story Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone what He had done for Him except the priest. In the second one, He told the centurion that his faith had healed his servant. Next we see that He healed everyone who was brought to Him. Then Jesus told a scribe that following Jesus meant he’d not have a permanent home. The disciple was told he wasn’t allowed to bury his dad. Jesus then got into the boat with the disciples and calmed the storm and when he encountered the demon-possessed men He cast them into a herd of pigs.

These stories tell us how Jesus related to the specific situation and not necessarily how we can expect Him to relate to us. He might – but He might not. For us to receive healing and then not tell anyone is to hide the glory of God! If we expect God to heal everyone we pray for, we demonstrate that we haven't understood this passage at all. Just because we follow Jesus doesn't mean we can't have a home or bed or that we can't have funerals for our loved ones. No! Not at all. In each of these situations Jesus was speaking specifically to the heart of the person. The things He did and said were not rules for all-time. Sure he calmed the storm for the disciples but that does not mean He will calm the storm we find ourselves in today. And if the Lord frees someone from a life of demon-possession it does not mean there has to be a herd of pigs nearby!

A beautiful part of this chapter is seeing how personally Jesus dealt with each person and each situation. He knew the centurion's commitment to submission and therefore He willingly extended healing to his household. His words cut to the heart of the scribe who wanted to know what was in it for him. And Jesus wasn't saying that burying parents was bad, but rather pointing out that his heart that was not fully committed.

It's sometimes our tendency to make rules out of what God has told us instead of accepting it as His words for us personally. Perhaps God has directed some of us to fast once a week. It would be easy to obey and be blessed for our fasting and then eagerly instruct others to fast once a week. Or not to watch TV, or to give up Facebook, or to give 20% of our income. We want others to experience the same blessing, yet we forget that the blessing doesn't come from following a formula, but in listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit and obeying what He tells us personally.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask the Lord to bring to mind anything He has told you personally, or that you have been convicted of, that you have then imposed on others – whether innocently or out of great intention. Ask Him if you need to release someone of a burden you have inadvertently placed on them. Confess if needed.
2. Ask the Lord if there is a directive He's given you that you have walked away from instead of obeying. If you have walked away without obeying, confess that to Him and make a commitment to obey immediately. If you have obeyed everything He's required of you, thank Him for the way He has grown you in obedience.
3. Ask Him if there's something new He'd like you to obey so you can grow closer to Him. Thank Him for having such a personal relationship with you. Thank Him for loving you individually and giving you individual attention instead of lumping you in with the crowd.

## DAY 10



### READ: Matthew 9

Before Jesus healed the paralyzed man, He first forgave the man's sins. Remember – this book is written to Jews who took pronouncements of forgiveness seriously. Only God can forgive sins! Even to say the words, "Your sins are forgiven" is to utter pure blasphemy! It's no wonder that they grabbed on to that thought. But it was *only* a thought. Nobody had uttered a word – they had simply *thought* their accusations. Jesus addressed those thoughts as evil in their hearts.

It's easy for us to entertain evil thoughts and think we will get away with it. Whether the thoughts lead to action or not, those thoughts are known by God and He will deal with

them. We can't hide behind the fact that we didn't actually **do** the thing we thought of... simply thinking it is sin enough. And Jesus knows our thoughts.

Matthew put in one little verse (vs. 9) about how he was called as a disciple. Yet we learn so much from this verse. First, Jesus called Matthew while he was busy in the tax collector booth. He didn't wait until a more convenient time. He didn't wait until he was in a more acceptable location. Jesus went right to the very place so many avoided – the tax collection booth – and called Matthew. Second, Jesus told Matthew to follow. He didn't beg, or plead, or give any reasons. He just commanded and Matthew followed. Matthew didn't question or ask for details or take time to talk to friends and family. Jesus spoke, he obeyed. Oh, that we would be so inconvenienced yet still so obedient!

The next few verses we see Jesus dealing directly with the Pharisees who are not happy about the fact that He hangs around with sinners. If He *really* was God surely He'd *know* who these people really were! Jesus surprised them – again – by reciting a Scripture verse, Hosea 6:6. They would have known this verse by heart as well. Hosea 6:6 says, *“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”* The words ‘steadfast love’ are from the original word ‘checed’ or ‘hesed’. This word is most often translated mercy or great love or kindness. This word carries a that weight most English words can't describe. ‘Hesed’ is the kind of mercy that pours out of a heart that never wavers in love and is the kind of love that gets dirty because it doesn't hold back in awful situations.

The Pharisees knew what ‘hesed’ meant. Jesus used this verse at the very same time that He was mingling with the ‘bad crowd’ because He wanted them to understand: This is what love looks like. It doesn't mean throwing money at the poor and hoping they get some. It doesn't mean walking on the other side of the street to avoid the stench of body odor, or keeping people at bay so you don't catch any horrible disease. ‘Hesed’ love is what Jesus showed: to rub shoulders with the outcasts, to love the unlovable, to eat with them, sit with them, laugh with them, and live with them.

When Jesus spoke those words of Hosea to the Pharisees their heads must have been ringing with the stark reality of both love and sacrifice. They were accustomed to great sacrifice in front of people for accolades. However, looking into the eyes of Jesus as He sat among the low-class outcasts, that old verse likely took on a new meaning. Love, true love, is sacrifice. And it is this kind of sacrificial love – to be seen with the unlovely, to touch the dirty, to sit with the lonely – Jesus requires of us as well.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask the Lord to speak to you about your thought life. Ask Him if there are thought patterns that are sinful, or contributing to stunted spiritual growth. God promises to never leave us without a way of escape from temptation, so ask Him for a practical idea on how to avoid sinning in our thoughts.
2. What has Jesus called you to do? Have you quickly obeyed like Matthew? Delayed obedience can be disobedience. Ask Him to search your heart on this matter. Commit to any necessary adjustments.
3. Ask Jesus to speak to your heart about whom it is that you find hard to love. Is it a people group? A specific person? Ask Him to fill your heart with ‘hesed’ for these people. Make a commitment to pray for the person/people God has brought to mind... not so that they would change, but for your own heart change toward them.



**DAY 11****READ:** Matthew 10

In verse 8 of this chapter we find these words, *“You received without paying; give without pay.”* Some have taken this to mean missionaries should not get paid. That’s a wrong understanding of this little sentence. This is actually telling the disciples, and us, that we are **not** allowed to withhold the gospel, or any part of it, because we haven’t received pay. It also applies to forgiveness. Jesus forgave us without any payment on our part, therefore we should not expect payment when we’re asked to forgive others.

This may seem easy to brush off because many of us A) don’t share the gospel often, and B) when we do, we don’t charge a fee. However, there are other ways we withhold the fullness of the gospel. Sometimes (although we might not want to admit this out loud) we actually don’t want someone else to be forgiven as easily as we were. We’d like to see them suffer... at least a little. People who have hurt us or who seem to fall into a category of ‘bigger-sinners-than-I-am’ should have to do something to prove they *really* mean it. Yet Jesus’ command to give without pay means just that: without financial payment, emotional payment... or any payment at all except Christ’s alone.

Matthew spends much of the remainder of this chapter talking about persecution and suffering for Christ. Jesus says that they will be like sheep among wolves. He is warning and equipping us. The last decades in our culture have caused us to forget this. We’ve developed a trust of the world. We expect good behavior, integrity, honesty, and acceptance of our faith. We’ve forgotten that the world can be a dangerous place for those who love God. Now we are shocked when ‘bad’ things happen and when our faith is ridiculed, sidelined, and criminalized in the news. But we shouldn’t be! Jesus told us we’d feel like we were living among wolves. And the western world hasn’t even begun to see how ferocious the wolves can get!

As we read this we could be filled with fear, panic, and sheer terror. Nobody wants persecution or tribulation or pain. However, Jesus doesn’t just tell us things will be hard. That would be terrible! He also gives us purpose, a plan and a promise.

Verse 18 says the **purpose** of persecution is so that we can bear witness. It’s like persecution will squeeze the glory of God out of us through testimony and through the very strength we receive from Him to live through it. The **plan** He gave us is powerful. It can be summed up in one word - endure. Plan for it. Don’t wonder if you’ll make it... plan on making it! Put things in place to **keep** you from giving up and that will encourage you to keep going! Finally, Jesus gave us a **promise** that the Father will speak through us when we are called to speak up for our faith. He has promised to be with us to the end of the age – not just until things get rough. And not only will He be there, He’ll also be speaking to us and putting His very words in our mouths.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Is there someone you secretly would like to see ‘pay’ for their salvation or forgiveness? Ask the Lord to speak to you about whether or not you have withheld forgiveness (or the message of the gospel) from someone until you think they are really ready, or really deserve it. Ask Him to forgive you if you’ve done this. Ask Him to fill your heart with true love for this person. Ask Him to give you a more clear understanding of how free your salvation is.
2. How have you planned to endure to the end? What strategies and boundaries have you put in place in your life in order to ensure you don’t give up before you reach heaven? Ask the Lord to speak to you about how much He wants you to endure



and the prize that will be waiting for you. Ask Him what you need to do today to be prepared for the hard days ahead.

3. Many of us are filled with fear when we think about persecution. Ask the Lord to speak to you the truth of His promises. Ask Him to give you a word, thought, or picture about His promise to put words in your mouth when you are called on. Ask Him to fill you with supernatural peace and trust in the truth that He will help you through every single moment.

## DAY 12



**READ:** Matthew 11

John the Baptist was in prison. He was there due to his message that the Messiah had come and that repentance was required. He was preaching and not everyone liked it – especially Herod’s wife. The reason she was so inflamed about John was because John preached against sin. Herod and his wife had sinned. Herod had taken his brother’s wife as his own. John spoke against this and was thrown in prison. While he was there he sent a message to Jesus. He wanted to know if all this suffering was really worth it. Could he just go a little easier on the message? Could he be a little softer on sin? Or, even worse, had he gotten it all wrong and Jesus wasn’t really the Messiah?

The beauty of this passage is that we see the humanness of John the Baptist. Often we put Bible heroes up on a pedestal and forget that they may have had a hard time hearing God, or ‘feeling’ forgiven, or knowing for sure what the will of God was. We assume that everything was easy or easier for them. However, in this chapter, we see the human heart of John... and he needed to be sure, he needed reassurance.

Many of us would rush to visit John in prison or send a token gift. Perhaps some of us would even apologize for all the pain and hardship he was suffering. But Jesus doesn’t go visit His cousin. As a matter of fact, John never saw Jesus again before he died.

Instead, Jesus sends back the exact words John needed to hear. First He points to His fruit. Jesus tells John about the miracles He has performed. The second thing Jesus says speaks directly to John’s situation. He wanted John to know He would be blessed if he endured to the end. Those who are not offended by Jesus will be blessed. This was enough to give John courage and strength to remain true to the message he had been preaching. This should give us courage as well.

Jesus had every opportunity to rescue John from prison. He knew John was there. He knew John was suffering was because of Him. But He didn’t stop John’s suffering. Instead Jesus spoke to John of blessing. Obviously this blessing was not during John’s lifetime. This should give us both confidence and hope. When tough times come it’s easy to expect God to rescue us or stop our suffering. Yet Jesus doesn’t always do that. There are times He does (think of how He calmed the storm when the disciples were on the boat), but not always. Jesus is concerned with our long-term benefit and blessing. Too often we give up on God or feel that He has abandoned us, when in fact He is trusting us to stay faithful to Him through our hard times.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. How have you been ‘soft’ on sin in your own life or in the lives of others close to you because you either don’t want to admit a sin, or because you don’t want to offend? Ask the Lord to speak to you about taking sin seriously. Ask Him to give you His view of love toward you and others, while also giving you perspective on sin. Ask Him for His

love to fill you so that if you do speak up on the issue of sin you can do it with His love instead of your own judgment.

2. John needed to hear from Jesus. He sent a message because He wanted reassurance. What are you going through right now that you need to hear from Jesus on? What do you need reassurance for? Ask Him to speak to you the exact words that you need to hear that will empower you to endure.
3. How do you feel about the fact that Jesus doesn't always 'rescue' people out of their suffering? Ask Jesus to give you His perspective on suffering. Ask Him to give you a passion and longing for eternal blessing.

## DAY 13



**READ:** Matthew 12

In verses 33-37 we see a warning again about having fruit that comes from either a good heart or a bad heart. Either way there will be fruit! However, the *kind* of fruit will depend on what's inside our hearts. Verse 36, though, should stop us in our tracks. This warns us that we will give account for every careless word we say. Yikes! Some of us will have a lot to give account for! This passage, although it is a warning about being careful about what we say, is actually a greater warning about making sure that the treasure of our hearts is full of God's righteousness and not evil. If our hearts have been redeemed and made righteous by God's work in our lives, the words coming out of our mouths (our hearts) will be evidence of that transformation. The challenge here is not about not saying certain words, or working really hard at having perfect speech, but about having a heart so pure before God that holy speech is a natural outcome.

Verse 42 talks about the Queen of the South. It is talking about the Queen of Sheba we read about in 1 Kings 10:1-13. That passage tells us that the Queen of Sheba heard about Solomon's great wisdom and traveled to visit him so she could hear his wisdom for herself. When she arrived, she found that the stories she'd heard didn't even come close to describing the vastness of his wisdom. She gave him lots and lots of valuable gifts in exchange for the wisdom he offered. She heard about Solomon's wisdom and made a fantastic decision to make the long journey and pay outrageous amounts of money to acquire that wisdom and experience it. If the Queen of Sheba thought it was worth all that to get Solomon's wisdom, how much *more* valuable is it for us to have access to Jesus, Creator of the Universe and King of Kings?

Verses 43-45 has a very practical application for us today. This passage talks about healing and deliverance. When we are set free from bondage spiritually, it's like our 'house' or our heart has been made clean, swept out and set in order. However, an empty 'house' or heart is an invitation for that bondage to come back. There is no vacuum in the spiritual realm. Either our hearts are mastered by God or by satan. We can't *just* be "set free". We must fill our hearts, minds and lives with the things of God so that the habits and bondages of the past don't come back. If we stop listening to degrading music with sinful content, we will eventually go back to that music – or worse – if we don't replace it. If we begin listening to music that helps us focus on the things of God instead, we will have 'filled the house' with good things. That is just one example of a way we can set our house in order and then fill it with the things of the Lord to protect ourselves from being caught in bondage again.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask the Lord to speak to you about the purity of your speech. Ask Him to show you how this is related to the purity of your heart. Ask Him what you need to do next in order to grow your heart into the treasure of righteousness that would produce righteous fruit.
2. How quickly do you access the wisdom and value of Jesus? Ask God to give you a word, thought or picture about how He would like to see you treat the glory & wisdom of Jesus.
3. Ask Jesus to reveal anything in your life that you need to be set free from. If He reveals anything, either pray for that freedom on your own, or make an appointment for personal ministry. Ask Him to give you a strategic plan to replace the old, bondage-making things, activities and people with Holy Spirit-filled things, activities and relationships. Ask for at least one thing you can do to replace that bondage with something healthy.

## DAY 14



**READ:** Matthew 13

This chapter has several parables in it, most having to do with the Kingdom of Heaven. The well-known parable of the sower who plants seeds is the first one. A parable is a story or word-picture told to help a particular truth or truths be understood better. In this case, Jesus is telling a story about a sower who throws seed out, hoping for a harvest. Some seed falls on the path, others on rocky ground, some among thorns and some on good soil. Jesus explains that the seed is God's word. The kind of ground the seed falls on is the state or condition of the hearts of people.

This parable helps us understand why some people hear the same message of salvation and freedom and they all react differently. It also helps us understand why some endure to the end and others don't seem to last. This gives us an invitation to evaluate what the soil of our hearts is like.

- Is it like a path, so hard and beaten down that it doesn't have a chance to penetrate and bring life? It doesn't take much for others to talk us out of what we've heard, or we don't even think twice about issues of faith.
- Is it like rocky ground that has a thin layer of dirt – just enough to get a little sprout started – but not enough to grow a sturdy plant? Those of us in this stage find it hard to stay connected to God in difficult times. We wilt and waver because of hard times. Perhaps we've even come to believe the difficulties we face are proof that faith doesn't work.
- Is it like ground that is full of weeds? If this is our situation, we find ourselves too busy to spend time with God, and no time to serve, minister, pray, read the Bible or go deep with God. We might also find ourselves attending church on the weekend but the business of life, the busyness it offers, and the pursuit of riches and success keeps our faith on Sunday and out of the other six days of the week. Other priorities take the place of our relationship with Christ and His Church.
- Is it fertile ground? This ground is soft and moist and sheltered. People with fertile hearts may find their hearts in pain sometimes as the ground is cultivated, to keep it soft. However, they also find that as they spend time with Jesus He waters their hearts with hope. They protect their hearts by spending time in the Word and in prayer. They begin to see spiritual growth, maturity and then their spiritual heritage being passed on to others.

Another parable in this chapter is the Parable of the Weeds. This parable is an answer to a question many ask: Why doesn't God just take all the evil out of the world? The truth is - He could. Yet in this parable we see the kind and oh-so-tender heart of God. He doesn't take the 'weeds' or the evil out of this world because if He did, He might disturb the growth and maturity of believers. He wants to give everyone a chance to reach full maturity. Our responsibility is to trust the God of the Harvest that He will come back to gather His people at just the right time. And of course... be ready.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask Jesus which of the four soils in the parable matches your heart. Ask Him what you need to do, if anything, to turn your heart into more fertile soil. Submit to what He directs. Ask Him to help you become a plant that grows to full maturity and bears much fruit.
2. Ask Jesus to give you the name of a non-believer, or remind you of someone you have been praying for. Ask Him to show you what kind of heart this person has. Then ask Him for direction on how to pray for this person's heart to become one of fertile soil. Make a commitment to pray for this person each day for the next seven days.
3. Thank the Lord for His never-ending love and His gracious and kind patience. Ask Him to give you endurance to the end so that you will be part of that Great Harvest one day soon. Ask Him to give you a glimpse of the magnificence of that Day.

## DAY 15



### READ: Matthew 14

In this chapter we see a few clues that John the Baptist had an interesting relationship with King Herod. First, the king obviously was acquainted with him well enough to have heard John preach about sin and he didn't like it. This is why John was in prison. He had offended the king. Herod cared enough to hate John. And even though he wanted to kill him, he really wanted to make a good impression on the people so he didn't kill John. At least at first. But after Herodias' daughter asked for John's head on a platter, suddenly Herod felt sorry. This gives us another clue about the relationship Herod had with John.

Although they were by no means friends, Herod probably held out some kind of hope, or perhaps had a soft-spot for John. Herod was known to be a harsh man, yet there was something within him that maybe had softened toward John - otherwise he wouldn't have been sorry over his death. Perhaps he hoped he could win John over, or that John could talk to his God for him. We don't know.

This we do know: No matter how important our connections, no matter how high in government our friends are, our only hope is in Jesus. He is the only One who can save us. We also learn from this that being connected to a godly person doesn't ensure you have safety in spiritual matters. Just because Herod hadn't killed John, or felt sorry for him when he was killed, doesn't give Herod any 'brownie points'. It doesn't matter who we know, it matters that we know and obey Jesus.

Jesus had been doing all kinds of miracles. Healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving sin, and the disciples saw it all. They knew He was God and He could do the impossible. After all they'd seen and experienced so far, they should have had a different answer when Jesus asked them to feed the people. We might have expected them to say – with full faith – “Jesus, we know you do miracles, You can make food!” Yet their thoughts were very mundane and stuck on the problem. Yikes... the money it would take to feed them all! How would they even get all that food to that location?

Jesus in His gentleness didn't chastise them though. He didn't say, "You fools! Don't you know I'm the miracle man?" No. He just did it. He did the miracle. Just like that. And He didn't say anything. The miracle happened and people ate.

The next miracle happened in a stormy sea. The most remarkable thing about this is that Peter is so excited about seeing Jesus in the storm that he is willing to walk on the water, risking everything. Just looking at Jesus and seeing Him in such a dark and stormy place made it worth the risk. Often we think we'll wait to obey until things have settled down. Peter was actually walking on water with Jesus in the midst of the crazy storm! Later, when the water was calm, Peter didn't walk on water. The adventure and the miracle was in the midst of the chaos. How many times do we miss the miracle because we're waiting for things to calm down instead of racing toward God's call in the midst of the chaos?



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Sometimes we want to get close to important people at church, leaders or decision makers, so that we feel better about our spiritual journey. Do you know someone (perhaps at work, politically, in church, or even your family) who you sometimes think will help you get a good position with God or with others? Ask Jesus to speak to you about this. What about when you get into trouble or a disaster happens? Do you run to Jesus first or do you find yourself going first to the people with means to help? Ask the Lord to give you a word, thought or picture that will motivate you to keep Jesus as your main source of help.
2. Are you in the midst of a struggle? Ask the Lord to reveal where your thoughts are anchored: are they stuck on the problem and the mundane troubles, or are they firmly planted on the truth that God can change it for your good and His glory? Ask God to grow your faith to be able to take your thoughts off the mundane and plant them firmly on the One who can do miracles.
3. Ask Jesus if there is something He has asked you to obey but you haven't because things seem too risky. Or is there something you are waiting for before you obey? Confess to Jesus your fear of trusting Him in the chaos. Ask Him to give you courage to get out of the boat in the midst of the storm. Ask Him for a word, thought, or picture you can hang on to when that call from Him comes for you to take that risky step.

## DAY 16



**READ:** Matthew 15

In this chapter Jesus takes us straight to the "heart of the matter". He speaks to the religious leaders and his disciples about the tendency to try to manage the outward, or even add external "rules", while ignoring the heart. Jesus doesn't cast aside the need to avoid "murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander". Instead, He emphasizes that it is from the heart that these things come.

Even the disciples' understanding of what Jesus was saying – "are you still so dull?" – was likely darkened by their concern that the Pharisees were offended. Jesus is truly looking for hearts that have an allegiance to Him and no outward appearances can fool Him. This is incredibly humbling, but also freeing. It means that we don't have to try to manipulate or manage people's opinions of us (or try to fool God, as if that were possible!), but can simply focus on seeking to have the right kind of hearts.

We will *always* get tripped up when we focus only on the outward. By going to the heart, we'll more likely avoid the hypocrisy that Jesus refers to in His exchange with the religious leaders. That is, we'll keep commands such as "honor your father or mother" and yet still have the Spirit of Jesus pervading our entire lives.

In another encounter, we see that Jesus values faith! Jesus' first focus was on Israel. He in no way viewed the Gentiles as "dogs", but so many Jews did. In response to the Gentile woman's faith, He extended His power, love and glory to her and her daughter. Throughout the Bible God starts with the Jews not as an end point, but as the springboard through which He will touch all the nations. And again, what is He looking for – whether Jew or Gentile? Faith! Faith in what? Ultimately, faith in Jesus!

To further show His glory, Jesus again shows His power over the lame, blind, crippled and mute and even through His ability to feed thousands. He truly is trustworthy! His motivation? Well listen to His own words – "I have compassion for these people . . ."



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Ask God to search your heart – are there areas of your life where you feeling "smug" about your obedience to God, yet are lacking in true love? Are there parts of your heart where bitterness or selfishness or lukewarmness exist? Confess this to Him and ask Him to help you have an undivided heart.
2. Are there people in your life that have a false opinion of you (think TOO highly of you)? Have you only told them about your good actions, but hidden from them the struggles and darkness of your heart? If yes, resolve to give them a more accurate picture of who you are.
3. Jesus loves to do miracles to show His glory & out of compassion. Ask Him – is there a miracle that He wants to do in your life OR in the life of someone you know? Seek His heart and voice on this . . . If He gives you something, then make it a matter of persevering prayer.

## DAY 17



### READ: Matthew 16

It is easy to constantly demand "signs" or "confirmations" from God. Jesus did many miracles, but this never satisfied the prideful, unbelieving, unrepentant hearts of some. We too must be careful when we ask for "signs" or "confirmations". Is it out of a desire to truly know God's Will and obey Him? Or is it from a heart that constantly wants to be wowed? Or are we really wanting to keep living our own way and demand that God do something big to try to get us on track? It is "adulterous" to give our allegiance to our own wills and desires! If this is our heart, God will not quickly respond to our shallow demands for more "proof".

Jesus also tells his disciples to watch out for those who have such an allegiance to other things and are obviously deceptive. In doing so, He warns about their "yeast", representing teaching. It's kind of funny that the disciples again have food on the brain! Jesus corrects them and challenges their unbelief. We can hear Him saying – "guys, don't you get it! Don't you remember what I've done, and what I've taught – that your Father knows you need food. I'm talking about the Pharisees here!"

Sometimes we miss out on what God's saying because we forget what He's already done or said. Often He's saying – "don't you remember?" It's on us to intentionally review

what He's done before we ask for further signs or confirmations. We can't emphasize this enough – He's looking for faith! Truly we need supernatural help in "getting it"! Even Peter's confession of who Jesus is in this chapter revealed to Him by the Father! Even the authority the disciples receive is from God!

The poor disciples must have had so much on their minds! Often they would only figure out things later on. This chapter also tells us that Jesus began to speak about His death and resurrection. This too they did not get! Even Peter, who so boldly had declared Jesus' identity, has to be sternly rebuked when He tries to suggest a different plan. The interactions of Jesus with both the religious leaders and the disciples should encourage us – let's get our hearts right, but also let's be patient with ourselves if it takes some time to get it all!



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. It's vital that we regularly review what God has already revealed to us and done in our lives. Often He's provided all the confirmation we need. Consider this – what areas are you needing God's wisdom on? Now ask - what has He already said to you on the matter – either in prayer or in His Word?
2. Do you at times struggle to trust God? The disciples did and they walked beside Him! Spend some time thinking about God's acts. Think about what He did in His Word. Think about what He's done in your life. Then think about what He's done in other's lives. This can be a faith booster! Perhaps make a commitment to read a really good Christian biography, to grow your trust.
3. Peter was so zealous, so passionate, so ready to step up for Jesus. He was also SO wrong sometimes. Ask God to show you where He loves your zeal. Also ask Him to show you where you are wrong. Do any necessary thanksgiving, confessing or make any further commitments.

## DAY 18



### READ: Matthew 17

At the end of chapter 16 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Chapter 17 begins with the fulfillment of this promise as He takes Peter, James and John up a mountain to see His glory – "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light." We should be fascinated with the glory of Jesus! The disciples were and especially by the inclusion of Moses and Elijah. What an experience! However, there is more to the story than an emotional high and glorious manifestation.

The voice of the Father declares from heaven; "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" What a statement! Yes, He is glorious! Yes, the history of Israel includes incredible figures and faithful men such as Moses and Elijah. And yes, He will be wonderfully raised from the dead. However, our most incredible response to all of this amazing stuff is to listen to Jesus and obey Him. God showed Jesus' glory to His inner core so that they would have the courage to keep following. That's what it's all about.

Jesus reminds them that He will suffer. Matthew also reminds us that faith continues to be a problem for His followers through the story of the demonized boy. Finally, Jesus refused to be trapped by the complexities of living in this world, yet truly living for another kingdom. He deals with the issue related to the temple tax in a very unique way. As His followers we must seek His heart on the many things that we face as children of the

kingdom of God, while we still reside in a difficult world. There's no exact formulas, but praise Jesus, He has all the wisdom we need! Let's not be rash and respond without first consulting Him. Others will see this wisdom and glorify God, or at the least, be stopped in their tracks in their efforts to discredit us.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Jesus is glorious! Think about the description of Jesus in this passage, throughout Matthew and the rest of the Bible. Spend some time simply worshiping Him for who He is!
2. We are told by the Father to listen to Jesus. Think back to the Sermon the Mount, even turn there in your Bible. Glance over the headings. Let this be a time of reflection and confession – have you been listening to and obeying what He taught in there? Ask Him to reveal any areas of disobedience. We certainly don't need to constantly search our hearts, but it is a useful practice to help us move closer and closer to wholeness. Remember this glory of Jesus? Ask Him to help you to become one who is a better "listener".
3. Is there any area in your life where you're struggling to live as a Christian because of opposition from others? Where your "kingdom of God values" clash with the values of the world? Ask God for wisdom, and for a strategy to navigate this complexity.

## DAY 19



**READ:** Matthew 18

Deep within our souls is the desire to be great. This desire has been planted in us by God! Many misunderstand this because the world has redefined and idolized greatness. Jesus takes the question of the disciples – "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" and provides us with God's thoughts on true greatness.

He says, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." True greatness involves humility! This is the primary mark of what Jesus is looking for! A child *knows* their limitations. A child *knows* that they need their parents. Is this our attitude? The disciples (and us!) often want to flaunt our strength, our abilities, our talents. Jesus is suggesting that we will be great when we humbly admit who we are and who God is.

Jesus also makes it VERY clear that sin is an issue to be taken very seriously. This greatness isn't just about being like "sweet, innocent children" who laugh off or ignore one's failures. Instead, we should aggressively deal with anything in our lives that lead us OR others to sin. Jesus emphasizes this by noting the, "fire of hell". Great people, Jesus is declaring, are humble AND holy. And anyone who is like this – child or otherwise. Rather than looking down on them, we should realize that God is with them! Sometimes when we're struggling, don't we resent the holy and humble ones?

This chapter continues on by highlighting how we should view the sin of others. There's so much that we can take from this teaching! First, the lost sheep stuck in sin are loved very much by God. In fact, He pursues them and is thrilled when they allow themselves to be found! We need to have the same heart! Second, if a brother is stuck in sin, a process exists where we take their sin seriously in a way that allows for gentle confrontation, with escalating consequences if no repentance occurs. Finally, when one has sinned, we need to forgive *as God has forgiven us*. God's bar of forgiveness is as high as the heavens! Jesus'



story about the unmerciful servant emphasizes that we are to aim for this bar or else we may find God's mercy to be cut off in our own lives. Brothers and sisters – let's seek forgiveness, as we don't want to get to this place at all!



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Spend some time considering your life. Do you have a dependency on God, like a little child does towards their parents? It's very likely that the answer is "yes" in some areas, "no" in others. Let God show you where you depend on Him and where you do not. Thank God for what He's already done in your life. Then make a commitment to depend on Him in areas where you've been taking charge.
2. Sometimes we have sins which we either perceive as big or small that stick around in our lives. Often this happens because we aren't aggressive enough in dealing with them or seeing how dangerous they are to our souls. Do you have any sin like this in your life? Make a commitment to be more aggressive! Ask God for a strategy that will result in real change!
3. Are there brothers- or sisters-in Christ that you know who have any patterns of sin in their lives? *IF* you have a relationship with them, read over the final chapter of today's devotional again, along with chapter 18 of Matthew. Ask God to give you direction on what to do with your fellow believer. Pray for wisdom, truth and gentleness!

## DAY 20



**READ:** Matthew 19

Once again the Pharisees try to trap Jesus. This time it's on the question of marriage and divorce. Later on in the chapter, a man attempts to get an answer to his question about eternal life. It's so fascinating that Jesus always responds with another question or by cutting right to the core of an issue. We can learn so much about how to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord through these passages! And right in the midst of it all, Jesus further emphasizes that the "kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these", that is, those who are like children.

Jesus takes the Pharisees question and raises up both the value of marriage AND singleness! If some renounce marriage to focus on the kingdom of heaven, and do so by God's grace and direction, this can be pleasing to God! However, if we decide to get married, this too can be pleasing to God *provided* we make a commitment to keep our covenant with the one *who God has joined together*. Marriage is not accidental and God is involved in it! It's all about God – that's the point – whether we are single or married. Further, Jesus makes an allowance for divorce, obviously out of compassion for the one who has experienced great pain due to their spouse's unfaithfulness. Jesus is making sure we all understand that in making marriage "all about God", we must not get caught up in severe black-and-white rules. Some may object – "but people will use this freedom to sin and to exit marriages when they shouldn't". The objection is true, but here's what we need to realize. God will deal with such straying and disobedient lives, if not now, on judgment day. Since it's "all about God", we can keep upholding high standards, while leaving room for other grace and future judgment.

In response to the rich man's question about how to get eternal life, Jesus goes right after his heart! In response to this passage we may be tempted to minimize what Jesus said OR believe that all believers should sell everything they have. There's a third way to go. It is to ensure that we have absolute allegiance to Jesus! This is what He is looking for! The rich man did not have this because of his riches. Is there anything in our lives like this? While

this may seem harsh, Jesus reminds them that there is AND will be great reward for this kind of allegiance. We have a choice – first now, last later OR last now, first later? May the Spirit of God give us wisdom into how this applies to us personally!



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Spend some time thanking God for His mercy! When we consider how high the bar is, we need to marvel at His grace and forgiveness. Let's also thank Him for being truthful with us, for being honest with us when we ask how we're doing. He really wants us to experience the rewards and blessings of His Kingdom.
2. If you're single, spend some time asking God for the grace to be content in your singleness. Also ask God – in this season of life, how can I use my singleness to my advantage for the advancement of the kingdom? If married, allow God to speak to you about your faithfulness or unfaithfulness to your marriage covenant.
3. Ask God to provide you with an honest assessment of anything that is getting in the way of allegiance to Jesus. In reality, many of us are rich relative to the world's standards. Are we like the rich man in anyway? It is vital that we let God shepherd our heart on this. ... Rash decisions are not wise, neither is ignoring the reality of what level of commitment Jesus is asking.

## DAY 21



**READ:** Matthew 20

God's heart and our own hearts often beat very differently! In the parable of the vineyard workers, Jesus tells a story that highlights the reality that God's heart is so full of mercy that even those who make a later commitment to Him are seen as incredibly worthwhile. He also warns of those who would complain about such mercy, "the first", who have a different way of doing math. They, in reality, end up "last". There are elements to this parable that we may not fully understand – do the "last" still go to heaven? Is this simply speaking of rewards in heaven? At times Jesus leaves details out, likely to cause us to seek His heart. He wants us to shift away from our way of looking at things to His way.

A similar point is made in Jesus' handling of the request for the sons of Zebedee to have a place of honor in the future kingdom. The perspective of those who are following Jesus is way off! While there IS glory in the future, there is also much suffering, even death and of course, service ahead of those who follow Jesus. Jesus speaks openly of His death and notes that others will drink a similar "cup". He is preparing His disciples to not be surprised. He then challenges them – and us! – that "whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve . . ." Brothers and sisters, this is how to be "first". We must serve *as Jesus did*. Now there's an incredible calling!

The chapter concludes with a powerful story of two blind men receiving sight! They plead for God's mercy! Once again, we see that others don't have the heart of God and want to shove aside these poor, desperate souls that God loves. Jesus has a different plan! "Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes." Truly Jesus was doing this miracle for the sake of these two men, but also hoping that the spiritual eyes and hearts of the spiritually dull would also open up as well.



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. It is vital that we have God's heart, desiring His mercy for all who might come to Him. Is there anyone in your life who you might struggle to see forgiven? Is there anyone that you've been withholding love from because they don't seem worthy? Confess and repent of this kind of heart, a heart that is not God's.
2. Jesus elevates being a servant! It was His way, and will be the way of all who follow Him. Ask these questions – does my family or those I live with see me as a servant? What about my co-workers? What about my church involvement – do I serve, and am I willing to lay down my life for others?
3. Jesus healed the two blind men out of compassion. Ask God to show you anyone that you can show compassion towards in the next day or two. Be open to surprises!

## DAY 22



### READ: Matthew 21

In chapter 21 we are told that Jesus begins to get closer to Jerusalem, and to His eventual death. What must Jesus have been feeling at this point? What were his disciples thinking? What was going on in the spiritual realm? One thing we do know is that prophecy was being fulfilled! Throughout Matthew, the OT is quoted many times. During Jesus' final days, the Holy Spirit is quick to communicate to the early believers and to us that God's redemptive plan is being carried out through the life of Jesus. Only the spiritually dull would miss it.

What is the proper response to God's work? Chapter 21 emphasizes praise! The people shout, "Hosanna!", as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Even from children, God has "ordained praise". This praise is in direct contrast to the religious leaders that question Jesus, including His authority. Jesus directly challenges them this time – with His own questions and with the parable of the two sons and of the tenants. Jesus is saying to them – "you should be praising me and what is happening! Especially you who know the Scriptures! But instead, you who showed so much zeal originally – 'I will sir, but he did not go' – you who I gave the land to take care of, you are the one who is ready to kill me." It should be very humbling to us, brothers and sisters, that it was the religious who weren't ready for God's work. Let's seek to get His heart for the days to come and praise Him!

In this chapter Jesus also deals with the temple and with a fig tree, symbolical of Israel's lack of fruit. The temple was a place of incredible importance for the Jews! And it has been turned into a place of sin! The place of God's presence was defiled! And the fruitfulness of Israel was striking and worthy of judgment. However – and this is VITAL to note – *hope is given* with Jesus' statement to the disciples that with faith, displayed through prayer, changes can take place. To them and perhaps to us, judgment may seem to take an inevitable course. For sure, some things are inevitable! Nevertheless, when we turn to Jesus in faith and prayer, much impact can be had. Again, we repeat, *hope is given!*



## JOURNALING AND PRAYER

1. Spend some imagining what Jesus' journey to Jerusalem would have been like. Imagine what all participants, including Jesus, would've felt. Spend some time praising Jesus for His determination and for His love. Praise Him for His everlasting kindness and for His power. Nothing could stop Him!

2. The religious leaders sadly were the ones who most often opposed Jesus. Here's an important question to ask – do we understand the prophecies about the future? Are we ready to cooperate with God's plan? Let's ask Him to search our hearts – is there anything in us that would cause us to do anything but praise Him and follow Him?
3. Jesus speaks of the power of faith and prayer. Ask God to give you some "prayer assignments" – things that you can pray for, mountains that can be moved. Not everything is "set in stone". God wants to use us!

## DAY 23

 **READ:** Matthew 22

The greatness of what's to come is highlighted by Jesus' use of an extravagant wedding banquet to illustrate the glory of His coming kingdom! This picture should give us much hope and expectancy. Think of the joy of a wedding! Think of the incredible anticipation of a bride and groom. Jesus is trying to stir in us a desire to look ahead, but also something else . . .

Jesus is also trying to get us ready! With the picture of this great banquet in our minds, we are humbled by the reality that, "many are invited, but few are chosen." It should humble us also that it is normal stuff like a field and a business that keeps people from being ready. Jesus is asking us – "do you have your wedding clothes on?" There's some debate over what this means, but let's keep this simple – the best way to be ready is to walk in a close relationship with Jesus! This is the kind of bride that will spend eternity with Him.

After Jesus concludes His teaching, the opposition that He has faced continues with full force. However, His wisdom and determination far exceed any attempt by others to trap, fool or stump Him. He is SO great! He handles a question about taxes by asserting that there are responsibilities to both God & the governments of this world. He also points us to the resurrection and the reality that the future will be quite different, though incredible! He then responds to the "test" of a Pharisee by elevating the two commandments to love God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. Finally, He declares His uniqueness by suggesting that His identity includes, "Lord".

What is the response of Jesus' questioners after He handles all of their attacks and inquiries? We are told by Matthew – "no one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions."

 **JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Think about what a wedding all involves. The decorations, the pictures, the laughter, the joy, the ceremony, the vows, the anticipation, the formality, the food. Praise God for the greatness of what's to come upon His return! Praise Him that entry into this kingdom is possible because of His grace. Praise Him for calling you to come to Him!
2. Spend some time asking God on whether there is anything in your life – any stuff, any relationships – that would cause you to miss out on this great banquet to come? We shouldn't assume that past prayers or commitments are enough? Do we have our "wedding clothes" on today?
3. Jesus displays His wisdom as He responds to many questions and attacks. What do you need wisdom on right now? Ask Jesus to speak to you about any such challenges or questions.

**DAY 24****READ:** Matthew 23

It's fascinating how Jesus spends His final days on earth before His death and resurrection. Many people portray Jesus as *always* gentle, *always* saying kind things. For sure, we see that His heart is like the heart of a loving mother who longs to gather up and protect her children! He does desire for people to receive mercy, compassion and grace! He does long to see people repent – no matter their position or place in this world. However, not everyone does. And when they (or we) harden ourselves against God, we can expect rebuke. Even such rebukes are out of love, to turn people to the greatness of Jesus' kingdom.

Chapter 23 is a difficult chapter to read. It's tempting to read it and think – "oh, those *terrible* Pharisees and teachers of the law. They are SO wicked!" Definitely they had huge problems! Jesus unloads on them! The severity of His words can certainly be traced to the reality that they had the responsibility as leaders to shepherd and protect Israel, not lead it astray. However, we would do well to read such chapters with humility and ask ourselves hard questions as well. It's better to turn now, then to experience any rebuke later on! Amen!

Let's carefully consider these question - do we place heavy burdens on others, but personally avoid helping them walk with these burdens? Do we love the praise of men, or rather, do we seek to be servants? Do we through our actions or words in any way "shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces?" Do we make massive commitments to God without considering what we're saying? Do we practice generosity towards others? Do we seek to clean the inside of our lives, not just create a fake appearance on the outside? Do we truly listen to the words of those who God has raised up among us to share what God is saying, weighing everything in prayer?

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Spend some time thanking God for His heart and love. Thank Him that He *longs* to gather us up. He actually wants us to do well! Listen in prayer – ask God to show you where He has forgiven you and supported you. Then commit to Him – "I will respond back with love and obedience!"
2. Ask God – are those that you know who are like the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Pray that God would move in their hearts! Pray that they would see their hypocrisy and turn from their ways.
3. Go through the final paragraph of today's devotional. Ask God – what is there that I need to change? Ask Him – do I have any areas of my life where I regularly compromise? Brothers and sisters, be aggressive with repentance and confession!

**DAY 25****READ:** Matthew 24

There are so many reasons to love God! One such reason is that He prepares us for what's to come. Matthew 24 is a chapter where Jesus lays out the process leading up to His return, the "signs". We certainly can take interest in the details of what God lays out in this chapter and in the other end times' passages through the Bible. We might even become fascinated by them! *However*, and this is VERY important – we must ask: in light of these details, with the knowledge of what's to come, how does Jesus advise that we prepare and respond?

Thankfully, we are told! Praise God! One of the key words is to "watch", or the two words, "watch out". We must watch out for deceptions. We must watch for the signs. We must even expect persecution! We must guard against being offended by Jesus when He allows false christs and prophets to rise up. We must be aware that Jesus' return will be very obvious. The very earth and heavens will be shaken. It is also wise for us to consider these things in the context of other passages of Scripture that speak of the end times. A "watchful" Christian is one who knows the Bible, spends much time in prayer and is keeping their relationship with Jesus strong. As Jesus says, "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." He is the only thing (person really!) that is solid enough to hold on to as the end approaches.

We can also prepare by being a "faithful and wise servant". Will Jesus find us doing his work when he returns? Our world is full of distractions, greed, entertainment, gluttony, self-gratification and much more. Jesus asks the employer, the employee, the husband, the wife, the parent, the child, the pastor, the church volunteers, the politician, the elderly, the teenager, the middle-aged, the same question – have we been faithful and wise in furthering His kingdom? We don't want to leave the answer to this question until He returns. Then it will be too late and some will be assigned, "a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The day and hour is unknown. Right up to that time, people will be engaged in normal activities. Will we be ready, on watch? This is the question Jesus wants us to answer in response to Matthew 24.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Do you feel that you have enough knowledge about what God's Word says about what's to come? Make a commitment to either take a course or read all of the Scriptures on the end times, or both. Ask God to give you discernment, day by day, as you prepare for His return.
2. Do you find that you have a regular pattern of considering what's to come? Take a look at your schedule. Are you connecting with God? Are you in His Word? Do you think about eternity? Reflect on and pray about any changes that may need to be made. Praise God for any past growth in these things.
3. Do some listening prayer – would you be described as a faithful and wise servant? Ask God to affirm you where you've been doing well! Thank Him for His power in these things. Then ask Him – where have you been unfaithful or self-serving? Take some time to confess and commit to a new path in these areas.

**DAY 26****READ:** Matthew 25

In Matthew 25 Jesus continues His “sermon” on the end times and preparing for His return. There are many powerful observations that can be made from what Jesus taught! They are truly a gift to the church in these days!

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like those who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.” Jesus is highlighting the time of His return! What a glorious day this will be. BUT, will we be ready? Jesus is drawing from a cultural practice of the Jews, in how they experienced wedding preparation and the anticipation of a wedding. Through it He is communicating to us something very significant. When He returns, we’ll either be ready or not. It’s a *personal* decision. We won’t be able to borrow “oil” from others. Christians have often debated what this oil represents – the Holy Spirit, a relationship with God, something else? – but let’s not lose the forest for the trees. He’s emphasizing *personal readiness*. Or in His own words, “therefore keep watch, because you do not now the day or hour.”

Another aspect of readiness includes being faithful with the use of what God has given us! It’s absolutely stunning that the person who does nothing with his “talent” ends up in hell. This is a sobering thought! Truly being a follower of Jesus involves good stewardship of our gifts, our finances, our time and our family. There’s also great news in this parable – there is reward and affirmation for those who are effective stewards. In fact, Jesus even takes into account that different people have been provided differing amounts of “talent”. This is why we need to lay down comparing ourselves with others. The real question is this – “have we been faithful with what we’ve been given?”

Jesus then refers to the moment when He comes “in his glory”. Look at the picture that Jesus paints! The angels will be with Him! He will sit on His heavenly throne! All the nations will be gathered before Him! What a time this will be . . . except it will also be a time of either great joy or horror, depending on the choices we have made prior to that moment. For those who were righteous, there is an incredible inheritance! For those who have been unrighteous, there is eternal punishment. This is especially humbling when we realize that Jesus illustrates both the righteousness and unrighteousness based on our decisions and actions related to the, “least of these.” How are we treating the hurting in our world? We may use the excuse – “I don’t know any”. Jesus may respond – “because you chose NOT to look.” We do well to carefully consider God’s Word on such things.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Consider for a moment the story of the ten virgins. Imagine Jesus returning in all His glory! Now think about how Jesus will receive you. Ask Him to minister to Your heart during this time – to protect you from either unnecessary condemnation or deception.
2. Grab a piece of paper, or your journal. Write down these words – “gifts”, “skills”, “money”, “material possessions” and “time”. Ask the Lord to speak to you about stewardship. How are you doing in each of these areas?
3. Do some listening prayer – who are the needy in your circles? Ask God to bring people to your attention. Ask Him for ideas on how to minister to them in the name of Jesus. It’s best that we hear His heart on this, rather than ignore these people OR we try to be everything for them.

**DAY 27****READ:** Matthew 26

As we turn to chapter 26 we find a wide range of events, people and emotions. Jesus is going to His death! While the religious leaders and Judas are carefully planning His perceived demise, we know that behind the scenes, God's redemptive plan is being carried out! Praise God for His wisdom, power and love! In our current times, there are also those who are opposing *us* as believers. Yet God is working! He is working out His plan in our lives and through our lives! Brothers and sisters, we'll consider some of what we read in this chapter, as it can encourage us to "walk in His steps".

After we hear of the scheming of the religious leaders, and before news of Judas' assistance in their treachery, the story of an amazing woman is told. What stands out is the *extravagance* of her act! Her devotion was of such a high degree that the disciples are "indignant". Jesus sees it much differently (doesn't He often!). Instead He views her act of love in such high regard that He exclaims, "I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the whole world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." The woman's devotion is important to Jesus and we can say that it was a reflection of the supreme devotion that Jesus would be showing the Father through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Before Jesus got to the cross, He initiated what has come to be known as the "Lord's supper" or "communion". Through this Jesus' mission is made abundantly clear – His blood was going to be poured out, "for many for the forgiveness of sins." What a sacrifice! What a blessing to us! A PRICELESS gift! When this meal takes place is intentional – on Passover. Jesus truly was and is the Lamb who was slain for our sins, which ultimately are against Him. Even better, this "last supper" is not the last one at all, as Jesus speaks of, "that day when I drink it anew with you *in my Father's kingdom*". This sounds like ONLY good news, but in the midst of this, Jesus speaks of the one who will betray him.

Judas' betrayal illustrates for us the difficulty of staying strong. This should humble *all* believers. In this chapter, Peter denies Jesus after being warned that He would! Even Jesus Himself struggles with the challenge of the Father's will. Would the disciples help Him in His hour of need? No, they sleep! Without God's help, we will fail. Such events highlight the vital importance of staying close to God. We will need this strength for the testing and trials to come.

Finally, we see both the wisdom and resolve of Jesus as He faces arrest and the high priest. He knows when to speak and when to remain silent. He knows when to escape and when yielding is the will of the Father. May we have the same discernment when under attack or in difficult situations because of our obedience to God's will.

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Spend some time praising God for His master plan! Praise Him for His power, that He accomplishes His will. Praise Jesus for His steadfastness in going to the cross.
2. Consider the extravagance of the woman who anointed Jesus. Are you extravagant with your love? Just as a person would bless their spouse on a birthday, anniversary or Valentine's Day, ask God what you could do for Him as an offering of love?
3. Our "spiritual" muscles need to stay strong as we prepare for difficulties. Ask God to reveal to you any weaknesses in your relationship with Him. They may not be sins, but places of apathy.



**DAY 28****READ:** Matthew 27

We don't know all of Judas' motivations for betraying Jesus. There are hints in the gospels that greed was a primary motivator. Whatever the reason, the pathway He chooses leads to the destruction of His life. Galatians 6:7 speaks of reaping what we sow. As we walk through the life and teachings of Jesus, we meet many people who either respond well to Jesus or who utterly fail. We too have choices that set a course for our future. God often leaves the story of people who have failed in the Bible to serve as warnings for us. Judas' end should provide us with a desire to develop a healthy fear of the Lord. Psalm 86:11 comes to mind, "teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name."

The mockery, viciousness and harshness with which Jesus is treated by Pilate, the soldiers and the crowd is so sad. We want to stand up and say, "how dare they!" However, it is good to ask – "what would I have done?" We believe that the Bible spurs us on to ask this question, how we would've acted. It pushes us to move to another question – "what *will* I do?" Right to the end we see that Jesus is faithful. Prophecy is being fulfilled powerfully through each step of the story we're being told.

It is really good to carefully work through a chapter such as this, reading it again and again. We learn so much about Jesus, about the reaction He can cause from His opponents and the devotion of true followers – such as the women who followed Him right to the foot of the cross. We are often in a rush as we move through God's Word, but whether we are meditative or not, it is spiritually vital that we pause once in a while and enter into what is recorded in our Bibles. We can even ask – "God, why did you put this in here?"

Chapter 27 concludes with great sadness. To many, it likely seemed as if things were over. It probably felt like there was no hope left. Do you ever feel that way? Brothers and sisters, soon we will see a resurrection!

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Read over Psalm 86:11, which is in the text of this devotional. Spend some time praying this psalm. Pour out your heart to God! Perhaps try praying on your knees, if this is not your normal practice.
2. Read over chapter 27 again. It takes great discipline, especially in our instant gratification culture. However, this IS the greatest story ever told. Write down your favorite verses, the verses that hit you the hardest.
3. Is there an area of life where you feel no hope? Does it seem like something – a dream, a plan – has died? Speak to God about this and tell Him how you feel. He wants to hear our pain!

**DAY 29****READ:** Matthew 28

We come to the end of the story, at least from the perspective of Matthew as inspired by the Holy Spirit. But what a story it is! And it's real! The power of it all! The glory of Jesus! Even the greatness of what happened is supported by the intensity of the earthquake, the majestic appearance of the angel, the hurrying of the women to tell others, the immediate worship of Jesus by the disciples. The resurrection of Jesus truly is one of the most significant events in the history of mankind. It's wise for us to meditate on its significance! Of course, its importance has resulted in many attempts to cover it up, including by the chief priests *right away*. Can we defend attacks against the resurrection of Jesus?

However, as we finish this part of the story, we transition to the next stage of history, even to *our* part. We have a job to do, a mission! First, it is based on the authority of Jesus! Our "going out" is under the authority of the King of Kings. We should remember this . . . It's not about us! It's about us *serving the King under His marching orders*. Second, we need to make disciples. A disciple is far more than a person who says they believe in Jesus. In fact, Jesus defines it – "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Personally we need to be these kind of disciples, but also prayerfully, carefully and intentionally helping others along this journey.

Finally, the immensity of the task requires great help! We can't do this on our own, nor should we. Jesus makes one of the most reassuring promises in the entire Bible – "and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." When we imagine or face challenges in fulfilling our mission, we should always be mindful of God's promise to be with us. This makes it all worth it and possible. Could we ever praise God enough for inviting us into His plan, and giving us all we need? He is SO good!

**JOURNALING AND PRAYER**

1. Let's thank God for helping us in our reading and understanding of His Word. Thank Him for our access to the Bible – we shouldn't take this for granted! Ask Him to continue to grow all of us in both our understanding of and obedience to His Word.
2. In your journals, write down a list of people you are discipling, or *could be* discipling. Ask God to help you make this list! Ask Him to show you where each person is at, and humbly ask for next steps and strategies. We may not have something to do with each person, but there may be some immediate action we can take.
3. Spend some time asking for the filling of the Spirit – God with us! Ask Him to fill you for the ability to disciple others, pray, and further His Kingdom until His glorious return!



## The Gospel of Matthew

The book of Matthew is a powerful witness to the identity, life and teachings of Jesus. There are many riches to mine in Matthew for anyone who is interested in growing closer to the heart of Jesus. Our Savior came preaching, teaching and healing and He is ready to further His kingdom in and through us. The book of Matthew gives us a strong sense of what a kingdom-centered life looks like.

### **Matthew 4:17** (ESV)

*From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*



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