



Bible Study

Matthew

Matthew 1

Matthew was a tax collector who found his Messiah in the Lord Jesus. Messiah means King and Matthew presents this theme many times in his gospel. He also loves to show how Jesus fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament and will often declare it when relating a key event in his writings.

The Genealogy of Jesus

Here we see the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. The long list of names confirms that our Lord Jesus, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of Mary, came at the end of a line that traces back to Abraham. He was the father of faith and his steps of obedience were a great contrast to the disobedience of Adam. A number of names are well known and some little known but I would like to highlight two names in particular. First is Ruth. Her marriage to Boaz leads to the birth of Obed, who is the grandfather of David. Ruth is a Moabitess, a widow and destitute but her loyalty to Naomi and her desire to serve Naomi's God, leads to an inclusion in the purposes of God beyond her wildest dreams. Second is Solomon, born of King David's wife, Bathsheba. It is a clear demonstration of the grace of God, that this woman should bear a son so prominent and significant in God's purposes. Solomon was renowned for his wisdom though, sadly, the initial liaison between his mother and David had been an act of foolishness, which led to great sin. But here we see that there is hope for those who suffer and for those who have sinned, in God's wonderful plan to bring His Messiah, King Jesus, into the world.

Joseph and Mary

Matthew gives us a very good insight into how Joseph handles the news that his fiancée, Mary, is to bear the very Son of God. Luke gives far more detail regarding Mary's reaction. Joseph responds to the news initially, by thinking of what the law said. He is minded to break the engagement but he knows that this is a very serious step, almost as serious as a divorce. However, he loves Mary and does not want to disgrace her. He's probably quite anxious, because he knows that some would even want Mary stoned to death, when they discover her condition. He considers all of this - and then God sends an angel to him! The message is very powerful - he must not be afraid. The enemy must have besieged him with all sorts of fears - his reputation in tatters - Mary's potential death - the taunts and insinuations of man. Only God can be convincing in such circumstances to say, 'Do not be afraid - the baby in Mary's womb is a gift of God placed there by God Himself - you are to call the baby Jesus - he will save his people from their sins'.

Matthew reminds us that this is a clear fulfilment of the prophecy mentioned in Isaiah 7, which also declares Jesus as Immanuel, God with us. Having heard the message, Joseph puts his fears to one side, he takes Mary as his wife and he sacrifices intimate relations with her until Jesus is born. There will be no confusion at all, that the baby is God the Son, the Messiah. He names the baby 'Jesus'.

Points to Consider:

1. Are there people we struggle with, who God blesses despite their past?
2. When a trial comes, do we respond according to the law or according to grace?
3. Do we assume a course of events based on our past or traditions or do we seek God?
4. Are we open to God doing something wonderful but very different?
5. Are our responses to situations rooted in fear or faith?
6. Do we obey God fully, even at personal sacrifice, or seek to do the minimum that we think He will accept?

Matthew 2

It is no surprise that Matthew records the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus at Bethlehem. The Magi were probably kings and the sign of the star is very significant to them. Their desire to worship and Herod's desire to destroy are in deep contrast. Jesus is the King of Kings and Matthew is keen to take every opportunity to point that out and to speak of Jesus who is bringing in the kingdom of God and releasing the kingdom of heaven to the earth. There are three key places mentioned in this chapter. Bethlehem, the place of birth, Egypt, the place of refuge and Nazareth the place of preparation.

Bethlehem: The Place of Birth

The Magi came to worship Jesus and to present gifts. Herod had a vague idea about the Messiah but had relegated such a thought to the very back of his mind. He summons the priests and teachers of the law and they quote the prophet Micah, that Jesus will come as a ruler and shepherd of Israel and Bethlehem is to be the place of his birth. Herod tries to deceive the Magi that he has a desire to worship the new-born king too but they are not fooled. They come and worship with their gifts representing, sacrifice, anointing / service and righteousness. The angel warns them and they leave Bethlehem, avoiding Herod. It is tragic that the scene of beauty and tranquillity surrounding Jesus' birth should be horrifically replaced by a mass murder of all baby boys two years and under.

Egypt: The Place of Refuge

Centuries before, in a time of famine in Israel, God sent Joseph ahead of Israel, where his wisdom and skill prepared a place of plenty when others were starving. Joseph knew himself that Egypt was never meant to be a final resting place for Israel and even commanded his bones to be taken and buried in Israel. Again, Egypt is a place of refuge for the young family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Matthew points out that this fulfils prophecy. This time there is no prolonged stay. Joseph, sensitive to the voice of God, has an angelic visitation telling him the stay in Egypt is over and it's time to go back to Israel.

Nazareth: The Place of Preparation

Joseph goes to Nazareth as a result of having being warned, yet again through a dream. Matthew is very pleased to point out that yet another prophecy is fulfilled. It is at Nazareth that Jesus undoubtedly learns Joseph's trade and also, he handles a growing family as Mary and Joseph have several children of their own, which we know included sisters and brothers. Nazareth is the place Jesus travelled from to the temple, where he reminds Joseph and Mary that God is his father and that to be in his Father's house was so important to him. It was a place that rejected him when he began his public ministry but also where he declares that he is the anointed one to bring deliverance, good news and sight to the blind.

Points to Consider:

1. Jesus was the object of the Magi's worship. How big a part does worship play in our lives? What are we giving to Christ?
2. What prophecies have been spoken over your life? Our lives can be shaped and governed by God's word. Trace your life and see where God's word has shaped and moulded you.
3. Reflect on times when God has protected you. Do we trust in circumstances or God?
4. Are we alert to God's word now or are relying on past words alone?
5. Those times when God asks us to be still and quiet, are we patient?
6. How do we handle the place of rejection or misunderstanding?

Matthew 3

Matthew now turns his attention to the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke has given us a lot of the family background but Matthew moves quickly to the man and his task, to be the forerunner of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John's Call and Appearance

John is a preacher, a herald, a proclaimer, a trumpeter of God's word. His location is the desert. People will need to come to him - he does not go to them. People do come in large numbers, to hear him. Matthew, keen as always to point out where prophecy is fulfilled, indicates Isaiah's prophecy of someone preparing the way for the Lord and establishing a clear path for the Lord to walk in. The call to repent is quickly mentioned. The need to change one's mind and ways is essential, to be ready for God's kingdom to be received. The kingdom of heaven is near, because very shortly the King himself, the Lord Jesus, will be among the people. Those who repent, confessing their sins, must be baptised as a symbol of their repentance. Mention is clearly made of John's clothing and diet. The importance of this is not to portray someone strange but, rather, someone focused. John is not absorbed with material, worldly things, his mission to preach requires a simple lifestyle, where the spiritual is seen to be much more important than the physical.

John's Challenge to the Pharisees and Sadducees

John is very strong indeed, when talking to the religious leaders of his day. He is not impressed with their interest in him but urges inner repentance, rather than an emphasis on the external. They are a brood of vipers. Like Satan himself, they are full of deceit and lies. Evidence of a changed heart is much more important than outward changes, which are often designed to impress rather than to bring people to God. John's stinging rebuke that God can make sons of Abraham, the hero of faith, out of stones and that judgement is coming, is soon very clear. The religious fervour of the Pharisees will soon be exposed as shallow and a sham.

John's Declaration of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus is superior to John. In the gospel of John, we read, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (*John 3:30 KJV*). Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The immersion and fullness of the Spirit is for Jesus and Jesus alone to give. The fire of God burning within the human heart, bringing us to a place of loathing of sin, a love for righteousness and an unquenchable thirst for God, is all his work. Such a baptism is thoroughly life-changing and, indeed, a prelude to continual fillings of the Spirit, available for all believers to enable us to function as God's distinctive people. God's people know that

God is a holy God and we must be separate in our hearts and minds from the sinful world in which we live, knowing that judgement will inevitably fall.

Jesus' Baptism

Jesus comes for baptism, not as a sinner needing repentance but as one who will set an example for us to follow. John is humbled by this request. We too are very humbled that Jesus should ask us to do anything for him. After Jesus' baptism, is one of the rare but beautiful pictures of the Trinity. God the Spirit, rests on God the Son and God the Father speaks His approval. Hallelujah!

Points to Consider:

1. How clear is my sense of call and in what way does my lifestyle reflect that call?
2. How boldly am I prepared to be to expose wrong and preach the truth, whatever the reaction?
3. How can I guard against a pharisaic spirit rising up in me?
4. How willing am I to allow the Holy Spirit to work through me in power?
5. Am I looking for comfortable ministry or am I willing to offer my body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – a spiritual act of worship that visibly demonstrates His love and compassion?

Matthew 4

Matthew introduces us to the temptations of Jesus, the beginnings of Jesus' preaching ministry and his calling of the first disciples. We also see Matthew's account of the start of the healing ministry of Jesus.

God's Knowledge and Plan

The first thing to note is the key balance between what God is doing and what Satan is doing. The time of trial that Jesus is about to undergo, is not cavalier or by chance. The Spirit of God is leading Jesus to the place of temptation, knowing what the devil has in mind. Our location and trials are all in God's hands. God himself tempts no one but the devil's wiles and schemes are all played out within God's knowledge and plan. The devil is seizing an opportunity to divert Jesus from the mission of going to the cross and to make Jesus conform to his agenda, not God's. Jesus fasts for 40 days. It means that he faces the devil, physically drained but spiritually strong.

The First Temptation

Inevitably, Jesus is hungry and the first temptation is specifically aimed at his body and his identity. The work of Satan continues today in the same vein. In order to destroy us spiritually, he will often attempt first to undermine us in the flesh. Jesus later declared to tired disciples, "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (*Matthew 26:41*). Jesus could have turned stones into bread but he declares that his life is not merely about flesh and blood but about the spirit. Man shall not live by bread alone but by receiving, feeding on and being nourished by, the word of God. To be fed by every word from the mouth of God, suggests intimacy and personal feeding. Nothing is second-hand. All believers, but especially leaders, must see that reading, studying, memorising and meditating on scripture, are vital for our strength to overcome the enemy. Unless there is a rich deposit of God's word in our hearts, then all of our efforts to resist Satan will be hot air with no power!

The Second Temptation

The second temptation is for Jesus to throw himself off the highest point of the temple. It is also, of course, the centre for Jewish worship. The location is deliberately chosen to enhance the sense of victory and overcoming, when Jesus will be rescued by angels and protected from death. Even though scripture, in this case, supports Satan's assertion. Jesus knows that this sensationalism is not the mission he is called to undertake. When he dies, it will involve him being lifted up on a cross of shame. There will be no rescue, because the Father has sent him to be the sin-bearer, to take the punishment we deserve. He will be the man of sorrows, totally familiar with our grief and he is the only one that can redeem and deliver us from Satan's curse. Religious observance is empty but knowing Jesus, is life

abundant! Jesus will be raised from the dead, as God vindicates his obedience. In this situation, Jesus simply takes authority and rejects Satan's attempt to lure him to follow his agenda.

The Third Temptation

The location moves again. The wilderness gave way to the temple and now, Jesus is on a high mountain. Satan shows him all the kingdoms of the world (and he is the prince of this world!). "Bow down and worship me," Satan declares, "and all this becomes yours!" Jesus rebukes Satan and powerfully brings this time of testing to an end, "Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only!" Satan is left in no doubt, Jesus will never bow the knee to him and he has to leave Jesus. Salvation for the peoples of this world will be achieved by defeating Satan through the cross and the resurrection, not by caving in to his demands! Angels come and minister to Jesus, even though he is almighty God, for he has faced these trials in his humanity and has need of refreshment and strength.

The Start of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus preaches in a place where there has been great spiritual darkness and the core message is that people should repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. The kingdom of heaven, with its very different values to the kingdoms of this world, is at hand and should be embraced and received. Fishermen are called to leave their nets and follow Jesus, so that he can make them fishers of men. Jesus proclaims the good news of the kingdom throughout Galilee. The sick are healed, news of Jesus spreads and vast numbers of people from all over Syria are brought to him to be healed of all sorts of diseases and delivered from demons. Wherever Jesus goes, large crowds follow!

Points to Consider:

1. How do we respond to times of testing? Do we blame God or do we see that He is in control?
2. What distractions are you handling at the moment? What is the enemy trying to keep you from doing?
3. For Jesus, hunger was the obvious challenge. What physical needs are you finding hard to overcome at the moment?
4. To what degree are we feeding on the word? How could we improve our spiritual intake of God's word?
5. Do we allow a debate to take place between us and the devil or do we resist him firmly?
6. We may not see angels but do we allow the Lord to refresh us after a hard time or do we just carry on?
7. Are we as forthright as Jesus in preaching repentance or are we guilty of offering an inadequate option?

Matthew 5

Matthew 5 begins a sermon that many refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven is near and, now, he outlines the key values and principles of this kingdom. Many who are not Christians, have great respect for this clear and revolutionary exposition of how we should behave towards God and each other. It is like a powerful commentary on the Ten Commandments, which does not take away the starkness of what the Lord requires but gives a very practical context within which, we can work out righteous living before a righteous God.

Blessings

In the first 12 verses, known as the Beatitudes, Jesus makes 9 statements around the word 'Blessed'. It means how happy, consecrated and set apart for God, are those whose character, motivation and disposition is to please God. These blessings promise an inheritance of eternal value, comfort, fullness and strength.

Salt and Light

The life of the Christian brings taste, preservation, illumination and direction to those who are lost and it causes men to praise God.

Fulfilment of the Law

Jesus has not come to abolish the law or minimise the contribution of the prophets. Jesus brings life to the law by giving us a clear context in which to live it out and he, of course, supremely, is the example of what God requires of us.

Murder

Jesus is determined to expose smugness and points out that in God's eyes, anger, unforgiveness and lack of reconciliation are symptomatic of the same problem. If we are guilty of harbouring these attitudes, the seeds of murder are present and we must repent.

Adultery

As with murder, Jesus warns against complacency. The act of adultery comes after lustful thinking, which is unchecked. The thought life needs rigorous and aggressive control. Therefore be alert at all times!

Divorce

The act of divorce is something which scripture clearly declares, God hates (*Malachi 2:16*). Some had felt that, as long as things were in legal order, almost any grounds for divorce

were acceptable. Jesus reminds us that only one ground is permissible, which is marital unfaithfulness (adultery). He further warns that non-permissible divorce causes the divorced wife to become an adulteress and, should she marry again, the new partner becomes an adulterer too! Strong thoughts, which run counter to the easy divorce options that even some Christians adopt. As Christian leaders, we need to think carefully about this issue.

Oaths

The making of oaths was becoming commonplace and it was deemed acceptable to back up your promises with them. Jesus urges us to keep our promises and to be people who have the reputation for doing what we say and keeping our word, without requiring some mechanism to demonstrate our sincerity.

An Eye for an Eye

Jesus takes the response we should make to those who grieve us, to another level. Instead of retribution or like-for-like, he urges forgiveness and thorough selflessness. Instead of declaring our rights, he encourages us to bless and be generous, rather than exacting everything we can from a situation.

Love for Enemies

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, to pray for them, to respond positively to the challenge they bring and to see it as an opportunity to become more Christ-like. It is much easier to bless those who bless us and far harder to bless an enemy. This love will definitely cause us as Christians to be distinctive and, of course, is the way in which our righteous heavenly Father responds to us sinners.

Points to Consider:

Take each of the areas highlighted and reflect how you respond to the teaching of Jesus. Is there any change you need to make to be in line with his teaching?

1. Blessings
2. Salt and Light
3. Fulfilment of the Law
4. Murder
5. Adultery
6. Divorce
7. Oaths
8. An Eye for an Eye
9. Love for Enemies

Matthew 6

Our Lord Jesus has been teaching the disciples, kingdom values and now in chapter 6, more straightforward instruction is given. Jesus is clearly demonstrating that that truth brings life-changing attitudes and, unlike the Pharisees, it does not lead to bondage and slavery but to freedom and life.

Giving

One principle recognised in society, is to give to those who are needy and unable to fully support themselves. This can be an act of righteousness but only if the motive and manner of giving is pure and humble. Giving to impress others and build up your reputation is condemned by Jesus. He reminds us that our Father in heaven never misses an act of selfless giving and He will reward those who do so in an appropriate manner.

Prayer

Again, the challenge is to those who see prayer as an opportunity to impress and demonstrate their spiritual prowess. The secret life of prayer is far more impressive to Father God than outward shows of wordy and elaborate prayers. The secret place may be hard to find in our modern, busy lives and, of course, some homes are so occupied that finding a place of quiet may require, creativity, thoughtful timing and extra sacrifice. However, when we find such a place, it is an opportunity to do business with God and, again, He will reward us as we humbly seek Him. Here, Jesus quotes what we refer to as the Lord's Prayer, which many have found a model prayer on which to base their own prayer lives.

Fasting

The same point is made as regarding our giving and praying. Fasting is assumed to be part of a Christian's life. How often and for how long are not commented on here by Jesus but the essential thing is that it is an activity designed to engage God and seek his face with earnest conviction. Long, drawn faces, which want to draw attention to themselves and the great sacrifice they are making, is a waste of time before God, who is not impressed with what amounts to hypocrisy.

Treasures in Heaven

Many Christians desire to establish an inheritance that their loved ones can draw upon, after they have gone home to glory. Some are trying to build up a pot of treasure, which they can enjoy when they are old. Jesus, however, presents a different plan. He warns against the folly of concentrating on earthly treasure, which is very vulnerable and can lead

to much false hope. Instead, he encourages us to reflect on building up treasures which are of eternal value. Treasures which are secure and come from our heart-attitude towards God and His kingdom. Jesus makes it clear that the key to eternal security lies in righteousness and a pure heart. Mixed motives and divided loyalties will lead to an erosion of true Christian values and a loss of eternal hope. We simply cannot serve God and money. If our hope is in God and in God alone, He will provide what we need materially and He will ensure that the eternal riches of His grace and love are ours to enjoy. The hope of being with Christ forever, supersedes any other hope. Praise the Lord!

Anxiety and Worry

Jesus shows that he really understands the basic needs that cause people to worry and get troubled. Food and drink; clothes and accommodation; our life and its length; the future; are all things that deep-down trouble and disturb people in different ways. Jesus says that our Father the creator cares for other parts of his creation, so we can trust him to care about us. He instructs us to live one day at a time. There is grace for today and when tomorrow comes, there will be grace and strength for that too. Everything is so wonderfully brought together with verse 33. The key is to seek God, His kingdom and His righteousness, so that we respond in godly ways to the pressures, trials and needs that come upon us. If God is first, then everything will find its place but a failure to put God first and the things that God values, will lead to trouble, discord and perpetual problems in life.

Points to Consider:

1. Jesus specifically quotes the Father's desire to reward (verses 4, 6 & 18). How do you understand and see that?
2. How strong is our relationship with God as our Father?
3. How are we guilty of some of the bad attitudes Jesus is seeking to correct regarding Giving, Prayer and Fasting?
4. How do we achieve the balance between sensible planning and over-anxiety regarding the future?
5. Are we really seeking first, God's kingdom in righteousness or are we following our own agenda?

Matthew 7

The Sermon on the Mount continues and we have clear teaching on handling others, more teaching on prayer, the realities of heaven and hell, fruitfulness and how to build solidly, so that whatever tests come, we stand firm.

Handling Others

Jesus tackles the issue of judging and assessing others. We can be so quick to identify weaknesses and faults in others and so slow to recognise our own faults, weaknesses and failings. Jesus does encourage us to be discerning and to know good from evil. However, the focus here is the way that we destructively pull people apart and examine failings in others, while totally ignoring our own faults. The charge 'hypocrite', from the lips of Jesus, is always very powerful because he alone is able to make a thoroughly true and balanced assessment of us. Often the needs and areas of concern in others are very small, compared to our situation. Our discernment and the conclusions we draw, must always be wise and careful, not frivolous or casual.

Prayer

Prayer, we are reminded, is so often a process and, as we seek the face of God, our requests should be in line with God's will, rather than just fulfilling our desires. So, to 'Ask', 'Seek' and 'Knock', presents a diligent and a confident approach that God is keen to answer our prayers and will answer our prayers. Again, the one who we pray to is to be considered a Father and we are his children. Father knows best and we can be sure that, when our requests are unwise or inappropriate, He will only give what we really need. Above all, it is so important to do to others, that which we desire for ourselves. Such an attitude will lead us away from indulgent, selfish prayer.

Heaven and Hell

Jesus describes two roads in life. One road has a wide entrance and many travellers. However, the destination is destruction. The other road has a very narrow entrance. It is easy to miss, because it needs care and thought to discover, but its final destination is life. Jesus knows very well, that those of us who follow his teaching, will always need to choose the narrow way – often seeming less attractive and always putting God and others first and self, last – but the quality of life we will enjoy now and in eternity is beyond measure!

Fruitfulness

As he talks about a tree and its fruit, Jesus is warning about false prophets who want to infiltrate believers and cause confusion and deception. Their fruit, which is apparent from

their character and their lives, will reveal their true nature. Jesus further tells us that those who persist in claiming spiritual achievement by false spirituality, boasting of their gifts, will be rejected in the final judgement. It is never what we have done, that gives us credibility before God but, rather, faith and trust in what God has done through us, in Christ. As in the words of an old hymn, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

Building Solidly

We can be wise or foolish builders. Each of our lives has a foundation. We all face tests and trials, storms come and go. The foolish persist in putting their trust in self, ignoring the word of God, but the wise are different. The wise listen to God's word and because they listen, they obey God's word. Obedience is not simply mental assent but it is an active change of heart and lifestyle to conform and change, to live as God's word says. Whatever radical change is required, we take those steps because we hear in the depth of our being, what God requires. This is building on the rock, who is Christ himself. His authority is not in the loudness of his voice or any external thing but in the utter integrity that he is who says he is – Jesus – God in human form!

Points to Consider:

1. Handling Others
 - How prone are we to being obsessed with others' faults, whilst overlooking our own?
 - How do we develop this properly in the life of the church?
 - What steps are we taking, to avoid criticism for hypocrisy as leaders?
2. How do we set the set an example in our prayer life and in our church prayer life, that prayer is a process and not always a quick fix?
3. Do we remind people that our destiny is heaven or hell? There is no other option.
4. Do we listen, obey and do God's word? Are we different because of its impact?
5. Are we and the people we serve, building on rock or sand? Are we secure in Christ or insecure?

Matthew 8

It's important to remember that a single chapter does not always mean that the events covered are in a single day. Chapter 8 is breathtaking, as we sweep through an amazing number of events in the ministry of Jesus. Clearly, the healing ministry of Jesus is highlighted but we also see his authority over nature and his powerful teaching regarding the cost of discipleship.

The Leper

It is always tremendous to see how, although Jesus has been with crowds, he still has time for one man... and that man has leprosy! The leper is left in no doubt about Jesus' willingness to heal. Jesus' ability and willingness are not in question, however, we have to understand that sometimes his timing and ways are not as we might expect. Jesus does not heal the man only to leave him in isolation. The priests' confirmation of healing would open the door for the man to return to normal life without any further question.

The Centurion

The Centurion is obviously an exceptional man in many ways. He loves his servant; he recognises the nature of authority and is convinced that Jesus has authority to command healing, just by speaking the word. Jesus responds with astonishment and joy. This is wonderful faith! The servant is healed at that very hour.

The Many

Peter's mother-in-law gets healed and she serves Jesus. She serves because of what the Lord has done for her. She does not serve in order to get healed. The demonised and the sick come in great numbers, all are released from the devil and all the sick are healed. Matthew is quick to point out the connection between the prophecy in Isaiah 53 and these events.

The Cost of Following Jesus

Jesus orders that the disciples cross the lake, to get away for the moment from the crowds. Matthew records two people who offer to follow Jesus. The first says, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replies that the foxes and birds have a place of refuge but he has nowhere to call home. Those who follow Jesus must find their security in him alone. There is no promised place of refuge. Another man speaks of first burying his father and then he will follow Jesus. This probably meant quite a long delay as it's likely that his father was still well and alive. Thus, Jesus' command to let the dead bury their own dead is not harsh but just

facing the reality that we must put Jesus first, right now. Everything else – all other priorities – must submit to him.

The Storm Calmed

Jesus was completely at peace, despite a sudden raging storm. It is inconceivable that Jesus would have sent the disciples to their deaths. Crossing the lake was his idea not theirs! Their lack of faith is soundly rebuked.

The Deliverance of Two Demonised Men

Having survived the storm, you would have thought that there would be no more immediate challenges but not so. Two deeply disturbed men come out of the tombs. They are violent but, despite their desperate plight, they are well aware of who Jesus is. The two men are wonderfully set free but the pigs, into which the demons are sent, are killed by running into the lake.

Points to Consider:

1. Touching the untouchable is a big challenge. Are we open to Jesus leading us to people that we would prefer to avoid?
2. Healing is definitely part of God's plan in both the Old and New Testaments. What priority does it have in your ministry?
3. Do we make it too easy for people to follow Jesus? He certainly did not make it easy. What is the cost of discipleship?
4. Doing what Jesus says, will sometimes lead us into a storm. His will is perfect but not always easy. How strong is our faith?
5. Are we careful to follow his plans? There is no need for anxiety if we are in his will. The demonic is often disquieting, even frightening, but Jesus has the victory! We must see his victory, more than the manifestations of evil.

Matthew 9

A paralysed man healed, a tax collector called to follow Jesus, issues of fasting, a sick woman healed from a long-term illness, a dead girl raised, the blind and dumb transformed and a prayer for more labourers in the vineyard. It's all happening in this chapter. What excitement and joy there is in following Jesus!

Jesus Heals a Paralytic

The penetrating insights of the Lord Jesus make this first story compelling. He saw their faith. Jesus saw more than friends caring for one of their own. He saw that they confidently expected him to act on their behalf and Jesus immediately addresses the most important issue – the need for forgiveness of sins. He also perceives the thoughts of the scribes and explains that this demonstration of his authority was for their benefit. Jesus demonstrates his authority not because he has to and not for show but to reveal that sin is defeated and all its effects on mankind are dealt with.

The Call of Matthew

Matthew leaves his tax collector's booth and follows Jesus. It is an immediate response. The invitation of Jesus proves irresistible. Matthew invites Jesus to dinner and several other tax collectors come, with others considered to be of a very sinful state. The Pharisees are upset but Jesus points out that those who think they have no need of him and are oblivious of their sins will miss out. However, those deeply conscious of their shortcomings will find hope in him.

Jesus Addresses the Issue of Fasting

Fasting is a part of the Christian's life and Jesus clearly endorsed that. However, the Pharisees typically were legalistic about it and missed out on its true benefits. Jesus allowed the disciples to enjoy his presence, because a time was coming when he would leave them. All that Jesus does is fresh and new and activities such as fasting help to put us into a place where our walk with Jesus is constantly renewed.

Jesus Heals a Sick Woman and Raises a Dead Girl back to Life

The synagogue ruler pleads with Jesus to come to his daughter who is dying. We know from other records, that she was 12 years of age. On his way to the house, a woman with a haemorrhage that had lasted 12 years believes that, just to reach out and touch Jesus as he walks by, will be sufficient for her healing. Jesus responds and instantly, the woman is healed. However long we may have handled a disease or sickness, it is never too late to receive from Jesus. He should not be a last resort but just to touch him is sufficient. By the

time Jesus arrives at the little girl's house, there is tremendous grief and sadness because she has died. However, Jesus has not been working to man's timetable. The woman in the crowd was not a distraction but all part of Father's will and plan. When Jesus insists on going into the house where the little girl lay dead, some mocked him but Jesus quietly and simply raises her from the dead.

Jesus Cures Blindness

As Jesus moves on, two blind men cry out for his help. Jesus asks them the question, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They reply, "Yes, Lord." We see again, that faith triggers into action the healing power of Jesus. Jesus is aware that these miracles could have the effect of preventing him moving around freely from place to place, which is why he asks them to be silent. However, they cannot keep quiet.

Jesus Restores Speech by Casting Out a Demon

A man who is demon-possessed and unable to speak, is brought to Jesus. Jesus drives the demon out and the man speaks. The insight that Jesus has, regarding the needs of this man, is very significant. The real problem was demonic, just as the real problem for the paralysed man at the beginning of the chapter was forgiveness, not simply his inability to move.

Jesus Teaches the Good News

Jesus goes through all the towns and villages, teaching and preaching the good news, healing the sick and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He is touched, looking at the crowds, seeing how helpless, lost and oppressed they are. Jesus brings answers to those people but a key task of his was to raise up other workers and disciples – those who would go in his name and with his authority, doing the works that he did. While doing those things that God calls us to do, we must also pray for more workers to be raised up and sent out into His harvest field.

Points to Consider:

1. How discerning are we when seeking to minister to those in need? We must look for the root issues, not just what appears on the surface.
2. It is good to exercise spiritual disciplines but are they leading to a deeper life in Christ or just becoming rituals?
3. Do we give up too easily? We need to persist as God gives us faith, however desperate a situation appears.
4. Are we willing to let go and let God? There is so much to do in His Kingdom but it is not all for us to do. We also need to pray for God to send others, so that the ministry of Jesus will continue to grow.

Matthew 10

Matthew brings to our attention the development of the team of apostles that Jesus chooses. Clear instructions are given regarding the task they have to do and also the way in which they are to behave. Jesus also warns the disciples about opposition and the clear challenges that they will face, serving him. He also exhorts them that there is a great cost involved when they follow him and the priorities that they should have in their lives.

The 12 Named

Having summoned the disciples who he has chosen, Jesus gives a special task to them. They are to declare his kingdom and to state what he wants to be done. Jesus knows our names – they are engraved in his hands! We too have been chosen by him and can discover the exact purpose he has assigned us to achieve.

Giving Authority

Two specific areas are named: the area of the demonic and the area of sickness. Jesus has authority over the devil and over sickness. He is delegating that authority to them. Just as he proclaimed release and healing, they were to do the same. The question is not whether they can do this but whether they will submit, obey and keep him in the centre of their minds and wills.

Instructions

The mission in Matthew 10 and Luke 9 is to the people of Israel, described as lost sheep. They belong to God but have wandered away. There is a simple message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near!' The rule and reign of Jesus over sin and sickness is available right now. All the disciples have to do, is to declare what Jesus has done and said. They have received from him freely and so, they go and give this blessing to others. Their mission is relatively fast-moving, so they need to travel light. Where they are received and people are blessed, so they will be provided for. If they are rejected and people have no time for them or their message, they must not argue but just move on. They will bring peace to those who accept them but those who reject the message invite judgement upon themselves. How utterly foolish to stubbornly refuse the wonderful grace of God! Our call is to go to all the nations!

Sheep among Wolves – Shrewd as Snakes, Innocent as Doves!

The impact of their ministry is achieved by calm, quiet submission to their master, Jesus, and total commitment to him. Their demeanour is simple faith. What will stir up trouble and persecution is not them but the furious anger of Satan, seeing his kingdom dismantled. They will find themselves before authorities and councils but they must have no alarm or fear.

The Father will enable them by His Spirit, to give the answers that are asked for. Family members will also be divided. Hatred will be stirred up from all areas because of Christ-like ministry through us. We are called to humbly serve God. We must boldly proclaim in public, that which Jesus has whispered into our hearts. We must resolutely resist fear and recognise that men can only destroy the body; they have no power over our eternal future. God decides our eternal destiny, so He is the only one to fear and the reality of hell is an awesome deterrent that should keep us in a right place with God, rather than wanting to please men. If a sparrow is known to God, we are of so much greater value to Him. He knows us down to the finest detail. A balance of fearing God but being deeply aware of His great love for us, enables us to withstand the most awful pressures from man and the world. To acknowledge God and honour Him, is a commitment that supersedes family ties. In fact, following Jesus may involve our natural family members being in conflict with us. Jesus warns that we should not be surprised if that happens. Rejection from natural family members because of Christ is extremely hard to take but those who receive and welcome us as true servants of God who speak His truth, will be rewarded.

Points to Consider:

1. Jesus still gives authority to his followers. Why do we so often not use it?
2. How much do we serve trusting God and to what degree do we rely on material possessions?
3. Are we wasting time in fruitless situations, when we should be moving on?
4. Do we trust God or do we give in to the fear of man too readily?
5. It is hard to ignore family members who disapprove of our faith but will we put Christ first?

Matthew 11

This chapter touches on the relationship that John the Baptist had with Jesus. We then move to some strong judgment statements and conclude with some powerful comments from Jesus on the subject of rest. These latter verses are very special because they only occur in Matthew's gospel.

John's Questions

It is interesting that, from his prison cell, John has questions about Jesus that concern him sufficiently to send some of his disciples to Jesus. The issue is whether Jesus is the Christ, the Promised One, or is someone else still awaited? John had no doubt about who Jesus was when he baptised him but, perhaps, prison life was casting doubt in his mind.

Jesus' Reply

Jesus doesn't give an academic answer but a practical answer. He states the work of Messiah as outlined in Isaiah 61. His answer is, in effect saying, "Look, the evidence is plain, things are happening, people's lives are being turned upside down, a multiplicity of healings and blessings are being released." Our actions truly, sometimes, speak far louder than words. Jesus urges that people should not backslide or lose confidence but, instead, believe and trust in him.

Jesus' Commendation of John the Baptist

There is no condemnation or even mild rebuke of John for the questions he has asked. Rather, Jesus chooses to commend and lift up John, extolling him as an incredibly great man. His work of prophesying and preparing the way for Jesus was exemplary. John's lifestyle of fasting and modesty, choosing material hardship and simplicity is commended. John came with a clear message of repentance, which deeply disturbed those who were far from God. Jesus came eating and drinking with sinners, drunkards and gluttons so, although he was none of those, it gave his critics the opportunity to accuse and malign him.

Jesus' Warnings to the Cities

Even though the miracles of Jesus had occurred in many cities, the call to repentance was ignored by many. This hard-hearted rebelliousness will not go unpunished. In fact, it will be frightful and horrific. How foolish, to reject the precious Saviour who came to rescue them not just from life's ills but from eternal judgement!

Jesus' Call to Rest

Jesus praises the Father that his disciples are like little children, who receive the simplicity of his teaching rather than complicating everything, as the Pharisees did. Revelation and a correct perception of Jesus come from the Father and to these blessed and privileged few, come the great words of comfort and strength. "Come to me," (v28). Jesus promises rest, peace and a cessation from struggle and weariness, to those who come to him. However, in coming to him, we must take the load that he gives, not more, not less. We need to heed and receive his instruction. The gentleness and humility of Jesus are hard qualities to learn but, as we grasp them and apply them to our lives, we can discover peace and rest within, which ultimately transcends our physical and psychological well-being. Of course, Jesus is talking about a deeper, inner sense of well-being, not a holiday!

Points to Consider:

1. In our moments of doubt, how has Jesus reassured us?
2. When others go through hard times, do we encourage them and lift them up or push them down further?
3. Are we prepared to warn others about God's wrath or are we too soft?
4. Are we looking just for peace and quiet or will we learn from Jesus, the way to inner peace and rest?

Matthew 12

Matthew tells us in this chapter about the ongoing conflict that Jesus has with the Pharisees, even to the extent of being accused of deriving his power from the devil! It's not at all surprising that Matthew concludes this section with a reference as to who are the true family of Jesus. We may also be maligned and misunderstood but we belong to God and his wonderful family!

Sabbath Day Challenges

The disciples of Jesus are rebuked for eating grains of corn on the Sabbath day. It seems very clear that the Pharisees are looking to undermine Jesus' authority and credibility. However, Jesus answers with an illustration from scripture where David (who, of course, the Pharisees honoured) allowed his men to eat consecrated bread on the Sabbath because they, like the disciples, were hungry. We can be sure on both occasions that this was not indulgence but genuine hunger. Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, underlines that the law is not a straitjacket to oppress but is there to direct people to God and His holiness. Reverence for God is not undermined in a case of genuine hunger. Jesus goes on to the synagogue, where a man whose hand is shrivelled and damaged, is present. Again, the Pharisees goad Jesus. In the presence of acute need, will Jesus still respect the Sabbath as they see it or will he heal the man? Jesus speaks clearly. In a situation like this, it is not disrespectful to heal the man. In a time of real need, we can reach out in response and not postpone it to another day. The reaction of the Pharisees is hatred and plotting, as Jesus heals the man and restores his hand. They are not willing to accept Jesus' reply or actions and every quiet demonstration that he is the Lord and the promised Messiah, sparks rebellion in their stubborn hearts.

Many Healings

Isaiah's prophecy regarding Jesus, the Messiah's, love and care is wonderfully fulfilled as Jesus ministers to considerable numbers of sick, vulnerable people. He has come for the nations!

Jesus and Beelzebub

A demon-possessed man, who is blind and mute, is healed by Jesus. Such a miracle of healing and deliverance was bound to draw attention to Jesus but the Pharisees, instead of humbling themselves before Jesus, arrogantly suggest that his power is from the devil, even the prince of demons! It's remarkable that Jesus takes time to argue a case before these contemptible people but he does. He speaks about how a kingdom divided against itself, cannot stand. He talks about binding the strong man. The devil is a thief and a robber. Jesus came to disable his powers, so that we can be free. A good tree bears good fruit – that is its

nature. A bad tree bears bad fruit. Jesus is good. He is God, come from heaven. It is blasphemy to credit the devil with that which comes from God. We will give account to God for every careless word spoken, so we must be very careful what we say. The description of the Pharisees as a brood of vipers, says a lot – venomous, destructive people, who will not escape God’s judgement! The sign of Jonah speaks of death and new life. A new opportunity to stop selfish ways and to do the will of God, is the only sign that these people will have. Of course, Jesus’ own death, burial and resurrection, is the ultimate sign of hope to those who believe in him. The nature of the devil’s work is that, when it seems he has left, he comes back with even more evil spirits, to torment and destroy. Only Jesus can effect a thorough deliverance, which is permanent for those who abandon sin and invite him to rule and reign within them.

True Family

Jesus refers to those who do the will of his Father, as true family. We must never rely on the natural but only the supernatural grace of God, available for us unworthy sinners. What a privilege to belong to Him!

Points to Consider:

1. Are there areas of legalism in our lives? We must root it out and enjoy God’s grace, which will mean holy living without fear.
2. Do we minister with wisdom or are we drawing unwelcome attention to ourselves? Jesus was mindful of those who opposed him and aware of his need to move freely.
3. Are we careful to discern what is truly of God and never attribute to the devil what he, the Lord, is doing?
4. Are we behaving as true members of God’s family or are we relying on a relationship which is now distant and cold?

Matthew 13

Matthew introduces us in this chapter to the major teaching method that Jesus adopted, especially with the crowds. This is teaching in parables. Parables are stories, usually based on events from everyday life but always, there is a deeper message within the story. The disciples could always access the deeper meaning from Jesus but the crowds were left to ponder and if there was real spiritual desire for truth, they could come back for more. We notice too, how Jesus takes practical steps to address the large crowds. He enters a boat, sits down and, from that vantage point speaks to the people, his voice being carried over the waters. It's interesting with our modern obsession for PA equipment, to see how much Jesus managed without it!

In these parables, Jesus is seeking to instruct us about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. As we meditate upon them, we see the values of that kingdom and its rich significance for those who seek God, first and foremost.

The Parable of the Sower

This story about a farmer sowing seed and the result when it falls into four types of ground is so foundational in terms of what Jesus' teaching is all about. The path, the rocky ground, the thorns and the good soil, speak so much of the condition of the human heart and its response to the word of God. It obviously applies to the unbeliever and their response to the gospel but it also applies to believers and our receptiveness to God's word, which is seeking to build us and make us fruitful. The devil is also active, trying to steal away God's word but our superficiality, our mixed priorities and hardness of heart, can also greatly hinder the progress of God's word, which seeks to shape us and make us more like Christ. Ears to hear are vital! Jesus makes it clear that hearing is obeying, not just absorbing information.

The Parable of the Weeds

Jesus speaks about a harvest time. This will be the time to separate what has been sown into lives by God and what has been sown by the enemy. While we wait for the harvest, both are at work. Judgement is coming but we wait for God's time, so that what is good is not unsettled by that which is evil. The fate of those who have rejected the gospel, is beyond description. Let us be sure that we are receiving God's word and building our lives upon it.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

God's kingdom may start like a very small seed but as it grows, it becomes huge. The use of a little yeast has its effect on a large amount of dough. The influence and effect of God's

word in the lives of those who obey Him, has great consequences. Our faith may seem so very tiny but God can use it to move mountains!

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

Jesus here, is emphasising that discovering God's love and his kingdom purposes, make everything else seem worthless. To have Christ is priceless and he is the only source of true joy. To have him, we sacrifice everything else, even as he sacrificed everything to come and save us through his death on the cross.

The Parable of the Net

The net is lowered and seeks to catch as many fish as possible. When the net is drawn in, then the fisherman will preserve what is good but throw away the bad. The angels will separate the wicked from the righteous.

The more we learn about God's kingdom, the more we realise there is to know. New treasures and truths are there to be discovered but old truths refresh and strengthen us, as we seek to serve Jesus our king!

Jesus, having spoken the parables, now comes to his home town. Here there is rebellion, questioning, disrespect and scoffing. Jesus did not do many miracles there, because faith and trust in him was sadly lacking.

Points to Consider:

1. What practical steps do we take in our ministry of God's word, so that we are heard and that we hold peoples' attention?
2. Consider your response to God's word. Are our hearts good soil? What are we doing to keep our hearts free from hardness, distractions and shallowness?
3. How conscious are we of God's judgment and how much do we alert those who listen to us, of these things.
4. How vital are the values of the kingdom of heaven in our lives and ministry?
5. Are we misunderstood? Do we perceive a lack of faith in our hearers? Jesus did – so be encouraged!

Matthew 14

This chapter describes three significant and different events: The death of John the Baptist, Jesus feeding the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water.

The Death of John the Baptist

King Herod is a very insecure man. He has been greatly troubled by John the Baptist, because his sinful relationship with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, was exposed by John. Herod had always wanted to silence him but feared the reaction of the people, who saw John as a prophet. He is aware of Jesus too and sees him as a potential threat. People like Herod are very dangerous and we see littered through history, tyrannical leaders who will do anything to keep power and avoid facing their own sin and needs. On the occasion of Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter dances for him. He is so delighted by this that he promises to reward her with whatever she asks. Her mother prompts her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Herod knows that there is no way out of this. He is distraught but cannot break his promise in front of so many guests, so the order is given. John is beheaded and his head is brought in on a platter to present to the girl. In the end, a scheming woman, a gullible daughter and a king who has lost his way, bring the life of the prophet to an end. Obviously God is sovereign in it all but it is interesting to see that this had a real impact upon our Lord Jesus who, though God, needed some space to reflect on the death of a friend.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

Jesus had little time to pause. Even though he had retired to a lonely area, crowds made their way on foot to find him. Jesus looks out upon the crowd and sees a lot of needy people who, despite their illnesses, had made quite an effort to see him. Moved with compassion, he heals the sick. Mark, in Mark Chapter 6, also tells us that he taught them many things. This all takes time and, as the day goes on, the disciples become anxious. They feel that the people need to go and get some food but Jesus has another agenda. "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." Logistically, the place seems to be bereft of resources but Jesus says, stay. If God is present, what more do we need? However adverse the conditions, the presence of Jesus transcends all of that. Jesus does not ask the crowd to solve the problem, he asks his disciples. They declare that all they can find is five loaves and two fishes. Jesus says, "Bring them here to me." The amazing reality that, what little we have, put into the hands of Jesus can produce abundantly, is overwhelming. This miracle sees once again, Jesus working with the disciples. He gives thanks and they distribute the food. The scripture confirms that they were all satisfied. No one was hungry. Praise the Lord! The disciples are the distributors though it's Jesus who does the miracle. There is food for them too and we can be sure that the leftovers were very tasty.

Jesus Walks on Water

Jesus makes arrangements for the disciples to go to the other side of the lake, while he dismisses the people and goes up on the mountain to pray. Spiritually, it has all been very draining, with the news of John's death, the many healings imparted and the teaching and feeding of the crowd. Jesus refreshed, then sets out to join the disciples – by walking on the water! His appearance causes a lot of fear but Peter, perceiving that it really is Jesus, asks that Jesus call him to come to him. Jesus bids him come and, at first, Peter is walking on the water too! Although he then falters and needs rescuing, do not overlook that, while his eyes are fixed on Jesus, he is walking on water and is far enough away from the boat to be in real trouble when his faith fails! Jesus rebukes him and when they both get into the boat, the wind dies down and there is an awareness that Jesus truly is the Son of God. Now, reaching the other side, another wave of healing begins.

Points to Consider:

1. John, a godly servant, dies! How do we handle those times when the enemy seems to have had his way?
2. Jesus works and provides in desolate places. Do we believe that?
3. Are we willing to be involved in Jesus' work? Does our organising and planning become an end in itself or a doorway to a miracle?
4. Do we truly place the little we have into Jesus' hands or are we more consumed with how little we have?
5. With God, nothing is impossible – even walking on water! Jesus' rebuke is strong. Are our eyes set firmly on him?

Matthew 15

This chapter opens with another discourse with the Pharisees, who remain obsessed with the outward appearance rather than the heart. We move then to another story of faith, which touches the heart of our Lord Jesus. It is always so fascinating to see faith in the unexpected people and a lack of faith in those from whom one would hope to see a better response. The chapter concludes with a miraculous feeding story, where a crowd of four thousand receive grace from God in their time of need.

The Pharisees are Closely Watching Jesus and his Disciples

Sadly, their vigilance is not to learn but rather to find ammunition to attack and undermine Jesus. By no means do we conclude that Jesus is negligent regarding personal hygiene but he is concerned at their misrepresentation of the commandment to honour father and mother. Some were neglecting to care for their elderly parents and were selfishly serving themselves. The ritual of hand washing was far less important than to be totally upright in the honouring of those who brought us into this world. Lip service is of no value, when the heart is distorted and selfish. Jesus emphasises that what we say is important, because it is a product of what is in our hearts. Our heavenly Father is looking to plant good things into our lives, which are revealed by our actions. The Pharisees were blind guides because their hearts were closed to God's revelation and so, they operated out of selfishness rather than a renewal of spirit. A heart which has not been touched and made alive by God is going to exhibit all the characteristics of uncleanness and deceitfulness. It is the human heart estranged from God which is the problem, not whether I have washed my hands.

The Canaanite Woman

This is the only time it seems that Jesus went outside the borders of Palestine. Obviously he knew what he was doing and his apparent abrupt treatment of the woman he meets was to test what was in her heart. Notice that she has not come for herself but, like so many mothers, is deeply concerned for her child. She has already discerned that her daughter's sickness is demonically-inspired – and that she needs Jesus, not just a doctor, to solve the problem. Jesus indicates that he has come for God's people and the woman is outside of that parameter. Jesus uses this phrase about the dogs (gentiles) not receiving bread (help) intended for God's people, the Jews. However, the woman is undeterred. She says that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. She is not claiming Jesus' attention by right but appealing to his mercy. Seeing such faith, Jesus responds, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." That very hour, her daughter is healed!

Jesus Feeds the Four Thousand

This is one of those occasions where a very large crowd of people gather and among many needs are cripples, blind, lame, deaf people, being healed. Jesus specifically makes mention that the crowd have been with him for 3 days with nothing to eat. The mention of 3 days, 7 loaves and a few small fish, shows that this is not the same occasion mentioned previously. The compassion of Jesus provokes the miracle and, taking what was offered, he feeds the crowd and seven basketfuls are left over.

Points to Consider:

1. What is more important: sticking to ritual or watching our hearts?
2. Psalm 139:23-24 exhorts us to invite God to search our hearts. Are we at risk of becoming like the Pharisees?
3. Are we persistent in seeking God's help like the Canaanite woman? Do we accept and understand God's tests or just give up when He appears not to listen?
4. Although Jesus' focus was on the crowds' spiritual and health issues, he did not overlook their practical needs. What can we learn from that?

Matthew 16

Jesus' ongoing conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees is highlighted again in this chapter. Jesus is concerned for the disciples, that they be on their guard against being distracted or deceived by these people. Following this discussion, Jesus comes to Caesarea Philippi, where God's great revelation to Peter will be shared. This is followed by Jesus making it clear that, although he truly is the Messiah, he will suffer, die and then be raised on the third day. The chapter ends with a clear call to discipleship which, though costly, will be rewarded.

Show us a Sign!

This is a cry, often coming from the lips of the 'religious' but faithless people, who do not know God as a reality. The pursuit of the miraculous for egoistical purposes, rather than to see people blessed, is an age-old problem. Jesus replies on this occasion, that people can read signs in nature but lack spiritual discernment. The sign of Jonah, who was swallowed by the big fish and then spat out to live, would be amplified and glorified in Jesus, who would die, be buried and then rise again, never to die. Jesus, as John pointed out in his gospel, is the ultimate sign from God, who loves us and wants to bring salvation to those who trust Him. The Sadducees and Pharisees sometimes appeared so plausible in their quest for truth but Jesus knew that those sucked into their wicked bloodstream, would ultimately become like them: Godless, doomed to be ever-searching but never finding, not really wanting the truth. Jesus fed his disciples with bread that would satisfy their deepest needs forever. Even the wonderful feeding of thousands with physical bread would be a small miracle in comparison with feeding on him, the bread of life.

Caesarea Philippi

The place is not so important but the revelation spoken out by Peter was to be foundational in the life of the church that Jesus is building. A discussion about peoples' perceptions of Jesus leads to Peter's outstanding statement. Men were comparing to Jesus to John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. They were great men indeed but Jesus is unique and any comparison is woefully inadequate. Peter speaks when the disciples are asked to give their understanding of who Jesus is, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This blesses Jesus greatly. Yes, it is true that he is the promised one, the Messiah of whom the prophets had spoken. He is the anointed one, the King of kings, who would usher in the kingdom of God. Hallelujah! However, what blesses Jesus particularly is to see spiritual depth and discernment in Peter. The revelation that Peter shares, could only have come from the Father. It is not Peter's cleverness which leads to such a statement but a work of God within him. The foundation, on which the church of Jesus Christ is built, is the truth of who he is. Authority to bind and loose, the power to overcome hell and death, all

flow from Jesus Christ, the only true Saviour, God in human flesh. However, we must not be surprised that such revelations to weak human beings, can so quickly lead to bad judgment and poor conclusions about other matters. When Jesus solemnly declares that he is going to suffer at the hands of those, about who he has warned the disciples to be cautious, that he will be killed and rise again on the third day, Peter is beside himself and says this cannot happen. Jesus than rebukes him as one who is speaking the counsel of Satan. Nothing will be allowed to distract or disturb Jesus from his mission to go to the cross and to conquer death for us.

Further to this, Jesus declares that all who follow him must be prepared to deny self and take up their cross. We must see that to be unwilling to lose our lives for Jesus, by refusing to deny self, can cost us our very soul. Physical loss is nothing, compared to spiritual gain. The kingdom of God has come, it is still coming and one day will be manifest in great power, when Jesus returns in all his glory. Praise the Lord!

Points to Consider:

1. On what am I feeding? Am I dealing with the temptation to hunger only for the sensational?
2. Am I willing to trust the Lord, regardless of what I see or experience? Do I walk by faith?
3. Am I close enough to Father God to receive revelation that is not dependent on my own knowledge and understanding, of things that God himself wants to show me?
4. Am I humble enough to realise that, although I may get some things right, I can so easily fall into error?
5. Am I prepared to follow Jesus' example and be a true disciple, willing to sacrifice everything to do his will?

Matthew 17

In this chapter of the gospel are spiritual highs and lows, followed by the practical issue of paying taxes. Firstly, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain, to witness a glimpse of his glory as he is transfigured before them. Then, coming down from the mountain, they witness the anguish and sorrow of a young boy plagued with the demonic. This is followed by tax collectors, ever eager to make money, who appear on the scene wanting to know if Jesus has paid his temple tax. Jesus, majestically and unruffled, handles all of these situations in a way that demonstrates the grace and mercy of God.

The Transfiguration

Jesus separates Peter, James and John for a special occasion. So often, the physical appearance of Jesus would not have caused him to be seen differently from many a Jew but here, the radiance and brightness of Jesus stands out very clearly. It is a taste of what John will see even more magnificently on the Isle of Patmos in Revelation. It is also noted that Moses and Elijah are seen. Many feel that Moses represents the law of God, which Jesus was about to perfectly fulfil on our behalf, and Elijah represents the prophets. The coming of Jesus was prophetic in every way and he is the final word from God. We can be sure that the sudden change in Jesus' appearance caused some sense of awe but when the Father speaks from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"; the disciples were terrified! This revelation of Jesus was quite overwhelming. However, Jesus comes and touches them. His words of comfort must have been amazingly special and his exhortation to keep to themselves what they have seen, until after the resurrection, was a powerful declaration of his trust in them. They also learn, as they talk with Jesus, how John the Baptist had been an Elijah-like figure, preparing the way for Jesus.

The Young Boy

As they come down from the mountain, they see that a crowd has gathered. A man comes to Jesus to plead on behalf of his son. The boy's condition appears epileptic but Jesus discerns something more than just physical. The disciples had tried but had been unsuccessful in bringing healing to the boy. The father is desperate, as he sees his son's life is in real danger if nothing is done. Jesus rebukes the demon that he perceives is behind the problem and the boy is healed. The disciples are perplexed as to why they had seen no breakthrough in their efforts to heal the boy. Jesus' reply here is that it is because they lack faith. Other accounts of this event include comments about the need for prayer and fasting. Certainly, we can conclude that prayer and fasting help to provide a climate of faith, so that we are responding according to God's will and not simply to the apparent need. Unshakeable faith comes from a small beginning and is a response to God's word. Our

confidence for the Lord to act and move in supernatural ways must always be fuelled by our faith in God and out of attentive listening to His voice.

Jesus now addresses the reality of his certain death and suffering. This is tough for the disciples, especially when they have just seen the greatness of his power, setting free the demonised boy. Jesus is very much aware of his impending death upon the cross but now another matter is brought to his attention.

The Temple Tax

Jesus addresses this problem by first of all stating the facts. Sons do not need to pay and, of course, he is the Son of God. However, to avoid offence, Jesus tells Peter to go fishing with his line in the lake. He catches a fish, which has a coin in its mouth sufficient to pay both Jesus' tax and Peter's. This happens, exactly as Jesus said it would.

Points to Consider:

1. How do we handle those special moments that Jesus gives us? Pray for wisdom to know when to speak, when to be quiet and how to feed upon them when we need help in our lives.
2. How do we handle failure? Then, how do we build our faith and strengthen ourselves in God?
3. How do we handle practical tasks? Are they a distraction to our ministry or do we handle these with integrity, in a way that honours God?
4. Are we looking out for God's provision? He will always provide – but not in the same way every time!

Matthew 18

Here is another very important chapter, dealing with the issues of greatness and humility in God's kingdom, care and respect for the young, handling people who have wronged you and the principles of forgiveness.

True Greatness is Found in Humility

The disciples were often distracted by thoughts of the kingdom being expressed in terms of power and position. Even at the last supper it was occupying their minds. Here, Jesus deals with it in a very visual way. Placing a little child right in front of them, he declares that you cannot even enter the kingdom unless you humble yourself and have a child-like attitude. The sense of child-like dependence, simplicity and a willingness to be instructed, must be in the hearts of kingdom people. Jesus then issues a strong warning to those who fail to respect little ones and who fail to honour simple faith. The punishment he decrees is devastatingly powerful. His expression of zero tolerance regarding such sin is of unusual strength from our Saviour's lips. The perils of eternal fire and hell are to be borne in mind, warning us to be vigorous in our attention to these matters!

The Lost Sheep

Heaven is aware of those who simply trust Christ with child-like faith and Jesus, the good shepherd, will stop at nothing in his efforts to seek and to save that which is lost and away from him. The joy of finding even one who is lost, knows no limits and such a one is appreciated, even though many are already safely in the fold.

A Brother Who Sins Against You

These verses contain excellent practice in terms of establishing good relationships among God's people, the church. This word 'church' is a very rare mention from the lips of Jesus. The first step that Jesus describes is straightforward. It is difficult, but to go and confront someone regarding a clear fault on their part, can result in a swift clean resolution. The second step, if that fails and the offender is unwilling to discuss or face up to the problem, is to take some witnesses. The presence of two or three witnesses is not to intimidate but to emphasise there has been a serious break of fellowship and that the matter cannot be dismissed. The purpose is to establish the facts and avoid things being shared out of just emotion or hurt. If this fails, the third step is to bring it to the attention of the church. This means that the whole body needs to be made aware of the problem, because we are all affected by disputes, either directly or indirectly. Should there still be a refusal to reconcile and deal with the matter, the person who stubbornly refuses to resolve matters, must be put outside of fellowship, with the prayerful desire that such discipline will bring them to repentance. There is great power in agreement. Firm decisions, agreed upon by the body of

Christ, have significance in heaven and earth. Agreement in intercession and agreement in fellowship, even with only two or three, guarantee Christ's presence and where he is present, there is life and hope.

The Unmerciful Servant

If the issue of greatness was a problem for the disciples, then certainly the issue of forgiveness was another. 'Do I have to go beyond seven times forgiving someone?' seems an almost desperate cry from someone exasperated by an ongoing failure. Jesus' reply offers no respite but implies that we must go on and on forgiving a brother. This does not suggest someone who is unrepentant but someone who just keeps failing. Jesus addresses the matter by telling a story about debt. He refers to a servant who has run up an impossible debt that he can never repay. When his Master comes looking for resolution, he begs for mercy and time to repay. The Master, amazingly gracious, absolves him of all debt there and then. Not only is he released from the debt but the debt is wiped out as if it had never existed. What a glorious picture of how Jesus has dealt with our enormous debt of sin! However, the forgiven servant then sees a fellow-servant, who owes him a very small sum of money. He acts without mercy, despite his recent experience – not only does he fail to forgive the debt but he offers no time for the man to pay. Immediately, the fellow-servant is thrown in prison. Others observe this and tell the Master, who is furious to learn of his servant's callous behaviour. He rescinds his forgiveness and has the man thrown into prison to be tortured. Having been forgiven so amazingly, we must always be ready to forgive others!

Points to Consider:

1. Are we preoccupied with seeking position and appreciation? How child-like is our faith?
2. How seriously do we take sin and how careful are we, with regard to those who look up to us, to avoid causing them to stumble?
3. Are we willing to take proper steps to resolve issues or do we just sulk or get angry?
4. How much do we appreciate the great forgiveness that Jesus has shown us? Do we pass the test of our willingness to forgive others?

Matthew 19

This chapter of the gospel covers the very difficult subject of divorce, then children, and the chapter ends with the very well-known parable of the rich young ruler. We will look at these three areas in the following study.

Divorce

(Please note that this subject requires a lot more study than we provide here.)

Large crowds are following Jesus and, after a wonderful time of healing, some Pharisees come to Jesus and ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" Their motive is not compassion or a real interest in people but it is to test or trick Jesus into a position where they can undermine him. It is very sad that such important issues, which attack and destroy society, should be dealt with in such a trivial way but the Pharisees often did that.

Jesus takes them back to the Genesis account (2:20-25), which defines marriage and makes it clear that it is God's plan for a man and woman to create a new family unit by the man leaving his father and mother and joining his wife. The union is sealed by them becoming one flesh in sexual intimacy and Jesus speaks over this, declaring that having been joined together in the way God prescribes, that no man should ever separate them.

The Pharisees then make reference to Moses, who did indicate that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away. Jesus replies that this concession was only available because of man's hardness of heart. This was never meant to give the impression that divorce was right or acceptable in God's eyes. He hates divorce (*Malachi 2:13-16*). Jesus then says that, apart from the case of marital unfaithfulness, a man who remarries is guilty of adultery. The disciples hear him clearly and, seeing the seriousness of breaking the marriage covenant, question whether it is wise to marry at all. This is a very different approach to our modern world, which divorces at will and does not take marriage seriously at all. Jesus honours marriage but also indicates that those who cannot marry or who choose celibacy to be fully available for the kingdom of God, are to be accepted too.

The Little Children and Jesus

This incident is also recorded in Mark. We can easily assume that it is the mothers who bring their children to Jesus, though neither Matthew nor Mark specifically mention them. The purpose of those who bring the children is that Jesus might place his hands upon these little ones and pray for them. In our present day, quite rightly, much is made of inappropriate touching but this must not overrule that there is a pure and genuine touch, which brings great comfort, support and love to all, especially little ones. The disciples consider Jesus to be far too busy to spend time with children and rebuke those who bring them. Jesus,

however, speaks and tells the disciples not to hinder them, because the child-like, simple, trusting faith of a little child is exactly what he is looking for in us!

The Rich Young Man

Jesus has challenged slack attitudes to marriage, a failure to value children and now he turns to what is required to receive eternal life. The young man in question seems to have a good attitude. He has tried to keep God's laws and his comment, "All these I have kept," is not, in any sense, interpreted as arrogance. In fact, he senses Jesus is looking for more but does not know what is missing. Then Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. Jesus says, "Go and sell your possessions, give the money to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven." For all his sincerity and desire to live a good life, Jesus has identified the root issue. The money and wealth of this young man is the overriding force in his life. He feels that he cannot give that up and goes away sad. Jesus offers no alternative and the disciples are surprised, as Jesus raises the stakes considerably in making clear what has to go if we are to know a relationship with him for ever. Indeed, it is hard for a rich man to enter heaven. Riches are not the only snare but they do rival God and we cannot serve two masters. The disciples continue to question, who then can be saved? Jesus assures his followers that, having left everything to follow him, ahead of them is a place of authority in his kingdom when he comes in all his glory. Personal sacrifices regarding family and possessions will not be overlooked by our Saviour in the final reckoning. However, he and he alone, can save.

Points to Consider:

1. Notice Jesus' wisdom in dealing with the Pharisees. How can we deal with issues and yet, not be distracted?
2. Are we taking marriage seriously enough as Christians? How can we best advise those considering marriage in the light of our passage?
3. The place of children and child-like faith is important. Do we make time for children? How can we avoid getting over-complicated and retain child-like faith?
4. We cannot earn salvation but is there a sacrifice we are unwilling to make, which is robbing us spiritually of the best that God wants to give?

Matthew 20

We find ourselves at a stage in the gospel where it is getting near for Jesus to go to Jerusalem and the cross, to offer his life in sacrifice for us. He tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard, he predicts his death, he listens to the request from the mother of James and John and he gives blind men their sight back!

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

A landowner is recruiting workers. He begins early in the day, hiring some, but at different intervals of the day he keeps on hiring workers. The time to pay comes and each one is paid the same. Those who have worked for longer begin to complain but the landowner explains that he wishes to pay each one the same sum, regardless of how long they have worked. Jesus is paving the way for the reality that some have known about the kingdom of God for longer but must accept later, those that they may feel are less deserving.

Clearly the statement that ‘the last will be first and the first will be last’ is challenging to those who feel that their efforts deserve reward. However, the grace and goodness of God turns all of that upside down and, in any case, our best efforts can never achieve a standing with God.

Jesus Predicts His Death

This is not the first time that Jesus has warned his followers about his sufferings but, again, it seems they are not heeded. On the way to Jerusalem – the place of execution – Jesus is obviously reminded himself of what will happen. His courage and resolution in the face of sure knowledge (not speculation) is remarkable. The mystery of the almighty Son of God, subjecting himself to men who hate him; who will give him a travesty of a trial and then mock him, flog him and crucify him, is amazing when, at any moment, he could overcome them all. Jesus, however, adds that on the third day he will rise from the dead. He knows that, however painful and difficult the path is that he treads, ultimately he will overcome death, the devil and all of men’s foolish plans. Praise the Lord!

The Mother’s Request

It will be interesting to meet the mother of James and John in heaven. She is clearly a formidable character and very proud of her sons. She wants them to have very prominent positions in Christ’s kingdom. Jesus answers that they do not understand what they are asking. Firstly, to be close to him will involve suffering and sharing in the trials he will face. Secondly, the position people have in heaven is determined by the Father, not by the Son. Thirdly, authority, prominence and position in the world, are very different to the kingdom of God. In the world, people trample on one another and behave selfishly to get to where

they want to be. In God's kingdom, servanthood, unselfishness and humility, characterise those who God honours. Jesus – as ever, the supreme example – came to serve, suffer and die. He gave himself fully for us and we must seek to be like him.

Two Blind Men Receive their Sight

This is probably the same incident referred to in Luke's gospel, where the story of one man is recounted, but Matthew tells us that there were two. The number does not really matter, because the miracle of blind eyes opening, overshadows everything. Hearing Jesus is passing, they shout out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" The cry is acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and the call is a request for mercy, not a command. The crowd try to quieten them but they refuse. They have faith that Jesus can open their eyes and tell him so, when he stops to speak to them. So many did not appreciate or understand the faith of these two men. Moved with compassion, Jesus touches them and, immediately, they receive their sight. Significantly, they get up and follow Jesus.

Points to Consider:

1. We must consider fairness in the light of God's word. How could the parable of the vineyard be applied to your handling of people in the church?
2. What can we learn from Jesus' attitude and behaviour, with regard to his impending death?
3. What are our priorities in life? Notice how Jesus responds to James and John, the sons of Zebedee.
4. Are we prepared to seek Jesus, regardless of the crowd? Do we have faith, despite serious physical challenges?

Matthew 21

We are now entering the last week of Jesus' life, before the cross and resurrection. It begins with an amazing entry into Jerusalem, a day which many Christians refer to as 'Palm Sunday'. Events move to a very turbulent scene at the temple, followed by the record of the fig tree being cursed. The authority of Jesus is questioned and then there are two parables, which show the Father's heart and sovereign choice, regarding whom He will bless.

The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

Jesus knows the significance of entering Jerusalem at this time and he has prepared carefully for this moment. He sends two disciples to find a donkey and its colt. They will be obvious it seems and they are to be untied and brought to Jesus. If a question is asked, the reply is to be simply that the Lord needs them. There is no fuss, no uproar or suggestion of theft, simply that the Lord needs them. Jesus enters Jerusalem deliberately in this way, to fulfil the prophecy (*Zechariah 9:9*). The one prophesied about was Messiah – Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus comes in humility, submissive to his Father. Later (*Revelation 19:11*), he is pictured on a warhorse, mighty and ready for battle. But this is an occasion for the suffering servant to come and lay down his life. Jesus is painting a picture in this event which many will miss but it is a statement. He is king but he must first suffer and die, before rising from the dead. The large crowd greet him enthusiastically. They proclaim him Messiah and spread the branches of palm trees across the road, making a path for the king. The welcome is so overwhelming, that whole city is stirred and the question for some arises, "Who is this?" The answer comes that it is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, but we know that he is Almighty God, King of kings and Lord of lords! He is so acclaimed at this moment but the tide will soon turn, as people will shout, "Crucify him!" and again, "Crucify him!"

Jesus in the Temple

Again, this is a scene of amazing contrast. The temple has been corrupted into a place of commerce and trade and is a far cry from the place of worship and prayer which the Father intended. Jesus, in holy indignation, overturns the tables of the money-changers and drives out all those who are buying and selling – a different purpose and spirit from that which God the Father intended. In this time of great turbulence, we also see that blind and lame people are healed. Little children proclaim Jesus as Messiah and sing, "Hosanna to the Son of David." But the chief priests and religious teachers become very angry!

The Fig Tree and Jesus' Authority

Jesus is looking for fruit but finds none on the fig tree. He curses the tree and condemns it to never bear fruit again. Immediately, it shows signs of death and the disciples are amazed. Jesus declares that words of faith spoken in authority, can have devastating effect. Even

mountains can be moved. No obstacle is beyond God's power. Prayer in the name of Jesus, can bring tremendous results!

Although Jesus' authority is abundantly clear, the rulers are determined to question it. They refuse to believe that he was and is God. Jesus turns the tables and asks questions of them. The issue of John's baptism gets to the root of the matter. If they say that it was from God, it raises the question of why did they not believe him but if they say it was not from God, they know that the people will turn against them. Their integrity is under threat, so they decide not to answer. Jesus says that neither will he answer them.

The Parable of the Two Sons

This parable is about searching where the heart is. A son who at first rebels but then decides to obey, is better placed than the one who says he will go but does not do it. Many may initially fail and make big mistakes but if they finally repent and do God's will, their sinful record is wiped clean. Empty promises will never enjoy the fulfilment of God's rich blessing.

The Parable of the Tenants

This is again, very disturbing to hard-hearted people. Tenants, instead of serving the master and working for his purposes, take over the vineyard and become obsessed with their own agenda. The master keeps sending servants to collect fruit but they are beaten or killed. The master declares that he will send his son, because they will surely respect him. But the response is vicious and cruel. They decide to kill the son, thinking that the vineyard will then be theirs. However, the owner is powerful and fearful judgement awaits them!

Jesus, the Son of the Living God, came to show us what the Father is like but, instead of being accepted and respected, he was rejected and killed. There is forgiveness in no other and awful judgement awaits those who reject the Son! Rejection of Jesus brings dire consequences. Let us make sure that clearly presenting him is always at the sharp edge of our ministry!

Points to Consider:

1. Are we humble or proud? Do we choose to obey God, even though we may look foolish? Do we act with integrity or are we careless? Are we swept along by the crowd or do we discern what is really happening around us?
2. Look at Jesus in the temple. How do you assess his reaction? Are there situations where we should be responding with righteous anger?
3. If people question our authority in Christ, do we have wisdom to know when to answer and when to be silent?
4. Do we dismiss or accept people too quickly, rather than assessing them carefully to understand their true motives?

Matthew 22

We remember that Jesus is in this period of time leading up to his death and resurrection. Jesus tells a parable of a wedding banquet, he speaks into the situation regarding payment of taxes, he talks about marriage after the resurrection, he clarifies which is the greatest commandment and who he, the Christ, really is.

The Wedding Banquet

The invitation to the wedding banquet is a picture of the great invitation that has been given, to come into the kingdom of God. The first people invited were the Jewish people but they made all sorts of excuses as to why they could not come. There is also total disrespect for those who come with the invitation, which again is a picture of how many prophets were abused and mistreated, instead of being received and welcomed. So the invitation is given to a much wider group. A group which includes all sorts of people who, today, we would refer to as 'The Gentiles'. Now, all are invited to come and enjoy the riches of the kingdom of God. However, there is still a protocol to be observed. Jesus is talking about the custom where, as someone enters the wedding hall, they are offered a robe. To refuse this robe would be an insult and to receive the robe guarantees acceptance. The man who tries to enter without a robe, is as foolish as someone who thinks that they can get into heaven without having received the robe of righteousness from Jesus. His blood covers our sins and makes us acceptable to a Holy God. To attempt to enter the presence of God without that covering, will see that person being cast into hell itself. There is no question that the invitation is to all but those who enter, must come as God prescribes.

Taxes

Jesus' patience with the Pharisees, who were ever looking for ways to trap him and undermine him, is immense. They question Jesus about whether taxes should be paid to Caesar or not. Jesus calls for a coin, points out that Caesar's inscription is upon it and then, with great authority, says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Marriage at the Resurrection

The Sadducees point out a tradition regarding marriage that says, if a man dies without children, his brother must marry the widow. They describe an incredible scenario, suggesting that the wife loses 7 husbands, who were all brothers and there are no children. They then put this question to Jesus, "At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" Again, Jesus shows patience answering the question but makes a very important point. Marriage is something that God has given for this life only. After death, believers will be united together with the Lord but not in a married relationship between a man and a woman. So, we are confident that Christian men and women will be with the Lord, but there will be no marital

relationships in eternity. However, Jesus' comments in no way undermine the essential nature and responsibility of marriage now or the hope of sharing eternity with those we love!

The Greatest Commandment

The Pharisees have not given up. They still want to trick and undermine Jesus, so they ask, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Only Jesus could put together a summary of the law which is truly beautiful and harmonious. To love God with the whole of our being and to care for our neighbour as we would desire to be cared for ourselves, is a perfect answer to the Pharisees' questions. Our need to keep God's law never changes but God has great love for us and His call for us to respond with love, is the essential foundation for keeping His commandments.

Whose Son is the Christ?

Now Jesus asks a question of the Pharisees. "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they answer. So Jesus then enlightens them about David's perception and understanding of God. He quotes statements from David, where David acknowledges the supreme Lordship of God and how David, by the spirit, is speaking about God the Father and God the Son. Jesus' purpose is not to deny the significance of David but he is making it clear that the Messiah, Christ, is God the Son, to be worshipped above any man or human king.

Points to Consider:

1. It is good to extend a very wide invitation to people to come to Christ but are we careful not to ignore the requirement for repentance and trust in Christ, who died for us?
2. How diligent are we, to be good and responsible citizens of this world, as well as belonging to the living God?
3. Are we able to distinguish between what God has provided for us now in this life and what is going to be our eternal situation?
4. Do we truly love God in a way that overflows with love to those around us?
5. When we honour those who serve God well, it is very good but are we careful to always make sure that the one most honoured, is the Lord Jesus himself?

Matthew 23

This chapter does not make easy reading. Jesus is wasting no words in exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and he is forthright in pronouncing judgement upon them. The reality is that Jesus in his life, ministry and words is so opposite to them. He is tender, true and thoroughly consistent.

Warnings against Hypocrisy and Self-Importance

The Pharisees may occupy a key seat in the temple but the comparison with Moses and his meek, clear teaching ends there. Their lives do not reflect what they teach. In fact, their lives contradict what they preach. They delight to make life difficult, even a misery for others, and have no compassion or desire to assist those they are meant to help. Their life is a show, an extravagant display, where the focus is to admire and honour them, rather than the God they are supposed to be serving. They love titles and acclaim and have no serving heart. Jesus warns that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be lifted up.

The Seven Woes

The pronouncement of seven woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees:

Woe – because the door to the kingdom of heaven is shut by them, excluding people from finding life and they themselves are also outside of God’s kingdom.

Woe – because, despite strenuous efforts to win a convert, the convert is entrenched in legalism and religion and is, spiritually, in an even worse state than them.

Woe – because they are blind guides. They are so meticulous about formula and how to make an offering, that their gifts to God bring no pleasure or reward to God and they themselves receive nothing from God in spiritual or practical relief.

Woe – because, though they tithe, matters of justice, mercy and faithfulness have totally escaped them. Focusing on things that don’t matter and having a poor regard for issues which are more important, condemns these people to a joyless life.

Woe – because the focus on the outside means that they have lost their way and have no sense of real cleanliness at all. However beautiful the outside of the cup appears, it is irrelevant if you want to drink from it.

Woe – because, not only are they personally at risk because of their failure to deal with their sin, but others looking to them for life and hope will discover it’s like coming to the grave. However beautiful their appearance, they only have rotteness and decay to offer.

Woe – because, though they claim to be building on a heritage, they are in fact are as guilty as those who rejected their heritage. They are not actually like prophets of old at all, they are guilty of the same sins as those who stoned and rejected the prophets.

Jesus concludes that they are all snakes, liars and condemned to hell. True men and women of God will be sent to them but they will reject, harm and even kill them. Because of their hardness of heart, righteous people, like Abel of old, will be killed. Jesus declares that his heart is so much to gather, protect, comfort and support his people. The peoples' hearts do not want this and, so, it is very distressing. For some, the true understanding of who Jesus really is and the hope he longs to bring, will come too late, as he returns as the Judge of all the earth!

Points to Consider:

1. We must heed the warnings that Jesus gives. Is there any hypocrisy in us?
2. What is in our hearts? Is outward form more important than inner holiness?
3. Are we critical of others, to the degree that we are guilty ourselves of the very things we claim to be attacking?
4. Do we regularly review our discipleship programmes, to be sure that we are truly developing Christ-like people?

Matthew 24

This chapter of the Bible is often quoted when looking at the end of time and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus talks about these events shortly before he is facing the cross and he knows that it will not be long before a time of great judgement comes upon Israel and also, ultimately, a time of final judgement.

End Time Signs

Jesus is by the temple when he declares that it will be utterly destroyed. The disciples come to him privately and ask, “When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” They are probably thinking that all of these things are going to happen in quick succession but, in fact, we are still waiting for the completion of the end of the age.

Jesus is aware that end times will give rise to a great deal of deceitfulness and false doctrines, with many suggesting that they are the Christ. He also says that there will be wars and rumours of wars. These show that the end is coming but they will not bring about the end. Nations and kingdoms will fight each other but we must not be alarmed, however destructive and awful those battles may be. There will be an outbreak of natural disasters, such as famine and earthquake. Again, however grievous they may be, they are only part of the end time process, they are not the end.

Persecution, grim challenges for God’s people, much hatred, false teaching and many deserting the faith, will all be in evidence but are not the end. We are exhorted to stand firm until the end. And, whereas there are so many things that we cannot change or stop, there is one thing that we must do. We are to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the whole world, as a testimony of who God is and what He has done in Christ. When God sees that that testimony has sufficiently reached all those God wants it to reach, then the end will come.

More Dark Times

There is now a description of terrible days where, for those who do not run away, there will be awful destruction. These days of suffering and persecution are indescribable in their awfulness! These descriptions may well have been fulfilled when Titus and his armies surrounded Jerusalem but they have continued to be fulfilled in other troubled times and will ultimately be fulfilled, when Jesus returns. When Jesus appears in all his glory, to bring final judgement to this world, it seems that, in the created world, there will be massive disorder. Again, this has been seen in a measure before. At the time of Christ’s death and resurrection, there were periods of great darkness and earthquakes. The final moment of Christ’s return, will herald more of the same. What Jesus has said will happen. His words will never pass away!

No One Knows the Day or the Hour

Jesus is very clear that no one knows the day or the hour – only the Father! His return will be like a thief in the night. It will be like in the days of Noah – it will be devastating and quite unexpected. Some will be ready but many will not! Some will be prepared, working as faithful servants, but others will be disobedient and they will be severely punished! These are very grim and challenging words.

Points to Consider:

1. When talking about end times, Jesus gave a framework but was not precise. Are we careful to follow this pattern in our teaching?
2. Are we prepared, as the second coming draws near, to live in a world that is increasingly chaotic?
3. We have a clear task in the midst of all of this uncertainty – we must share the good news! Only when God sees this task completed, will He end all the trials and troubles experienced here on this earth. Are we proclaiming Christ and his kingdom?
4. Are we diligent to proclaim truth, knowing that sadly, for some, heresy and false teaching will be more acceptable than the precious truth of the Gospel?

Matthew 25

This chapter introduces us to three key teaching points. Firstly, the parable of the ten virgins, secondly, the parable of the talents and, thirdly, the great judgement scene of the sheep and the goats. All three events refer to the second coming of our Lord Jesus. They emphasise our need to be ready for that time, when we will be made accountable for our lives lived on this earth.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

The picture of a wedding is set before us. The one the guests await is the bridegroom. In many cultures, the bride is the long-awaited person but, here, the significance of Jesus is clearly seen. We are the bride of Christ. Jesus has purchased us with his precious blood and has done everything to present us pure and spotless. However, he is the main figure of the day. No one will go into the banquet until he comes. When that moment arrives, those ready and waiting will follow him into the banquet but those who are late will be shut out.

Five wise virgins wait with their lamps ready and oil to burn in them. Five foolish virgins also have lamps but they have no oil. When the time comes to use the lamps, the five foolish virgins suddenly realise that they need oil. However, while they go out to buy some, the bridegroom arrives and they are shut out.

This powerful picture has been interpreted as the oil being a symbol of the Holy Spirit. We need always to be full of the Holy Spirit and led by him. If we are walking with God, we will not miss out on His blessings. We do not know when Jesus the bridegroom will come but he will come and we need to be alert and in good relationship with him. The most haunting, sad words we could ever hear would be that he does not know us. However, to walk with him, obeying the promptings of the Holy Spirit, will mean that we will enter the banquet – even heaven itself – to enjoy what our Saviour has planned for us from eternity!

The Parable of the Talents

The message is striking. A master leaves to travel and entrusts his servants with talents to use while he is gone. The amounts differ, but the challenge is that they must use what they have been given, wisely and well.

Two servants respond very well. They both double what they have been given. The master's response to these two is the same. They are commended and told that they will be entrusted with many things. They are also invited to enjoy their master's happiness. What a response! Authority and joy are the portion of those who use well, what they have been given. The master's joy is to give and to reward. He loves to bless His people who respond to His word.

One servant responds badly. He has buried his gift and done nothing with it. He claims that his master is a hard man but his master describes him as wicked and lazy. The consequences of his laziness are eternal. No happiness for him but, rather, torment and pain. He has completely missed the point, in disregarding the gift entrusted to him.

Do not be envious or distressed concerning what others have but, rather, be concerned to use your gifts to the full. We must serve with eager, conscientious hearts, not neglecting the great gift of salvation through faith, which has been offered to us in Christ Jesus (*Hebrews 4:1-2*).

The Sheep and the Goats

The great judgement at the end of time will result in a profound separation of those going to heaven (the sheep) and those heading for hell (the goats). In this life, sometimes we may not be able to distinguish between the two, but God knows and the day will come when it will be clear to all. We are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus, who shed his blood for us. Nothing we do can ever save us. However, evidence of our genuine faith in Christ, is found in our care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. This is the heart of God and when our heart is touched by His heart, then we begin to behave like Him.

Points to Consider:

1. Is our heart really touched by God? How serious are we about wanting to be with Him? Are we prepared or careless regarding Jesus' second coming?
2. Do we want the Father's joy or wrath?
3. How are working out our salvation? Do we see our ministry as spiritual, with no real practical roots, or as practical, with no real spiritual life?
4. Remember Jesus is nearing the cross. Are we prepared to obey God and preach hard truth, which gains no popularity, or do we compromise, to try and win the praise of men?

Matthew 26

The teaching in this chapter will bring us near to Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus will prepare for the Passover, he will introduce the breaking of bread, he will pray in Gethsemane, he will be arrested, he will stand before the Sanhedrin, he will handle Peter's denial of him and the other disciples will desert him. Sometimes, events recorded in the Bible cover a large amount of time but these events are crammed into a matter of hours!

Plots, Anointing and Betrayal

The chief priests are determined to arrest Jesus and want to kill him. Meanwhile, Jesus is in the home of Simon the leper, where a woman anoints him with a very expensive perfume. Jesus declares that the woman is doing a wonderful thing, preparing him for burial. Judas then negotiates with the chief priests and agrees a price for handing Jesus over to them. What a contrast! Clearly, the anointing of Jesus stands out against the grubby and evil schemes of men.

The Passover

Jews celebrate the Passover to remember their deliverance from the slavery of Egypt. Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world and he takes the opportunity to introduce something very special. He takes bread and speaks of it as a symbol of his body and he takes a cup as a symbol of his blood. He is about to offer his body and blood as a sacrifice for you and for me and, until he comes, we will remember him in this way.

Peter's Denial

Around the Passover table, Jesus looks at the disciples and warns them they are about to be scattered. Peter refuses to accept this but Jesus says that even that very night Peter will disown him three times.

Gethsemane

Jesus leaves the table to enter the garden of Gethsemane and, leaving most of the disciples, takes Peter, James and John a little deeper into the garden. It is here that we observe one of the most powerful prayer times that there has ever been. Jesus is aware of the immense cost of going to the cross and is talking to his Father in an overwhelmingly personal way. Three times he raises with the Father the issue of going to the cross and three times he concludes that it is not his will but the Father's will that must be done. Jesus emerges from this time to go to the cross and finds that the disciples are asleep.

The Arrest of Jesus and the Beginnings of His Trial

Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, identifying him as the one whom the crowd should arrest. In the heat of the moment, a servant of the high priest has his ear cut off but Jesus heals him. Jesus indicates that there are thousands of Angels who can intervene but he is not going to call upon them. Jesus then stands before the Sanhedrin, where they accuse him of blasphemy. Jesus is unafraid and for most of the time he is silent, but when asked, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God", he declares that he is and they spit on him and beat him. Outside, in the courtyard, Peter is identified by a servant girl. She declares that he is a follower of Jesus. Peter denies this three times but, upon hearing the cock crow, he is devastated to realise that he has disowned Jesus three times, exactly as Jesus had told him!

Points to Consider:

1. It is important to honour Jesus, even if we are accused of extravagance or excess. Do we give in to peoples' thoughts of us or do we obey God?
2. When we break bread to take communion, we must avoid ritual and simply focus upon what Jesus did, remembering him sensitively but joyfully, because his actions were to free us from our sins, not to condemn us!
3. We must be wary of making promises and commitments which we then do not keep. This is why Jesus exhorted his disciples to count the cost before following him.
4. We will never have to handle what Jesus did but, sometimes, serious issues require prolonged and deep prayer, so that we come to the place where God wants us to be.
5. False accusation and the goading of men will always be a problem. Like Jesus, we need to be prepared to know when to be silent and when to speak.

Matthew 27

After what must have been a very long night, Jesus faces a new day when he will be crucified and buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. During this day, Judas will hang himself, Jesus will stand before Pilate, he will be mocked by the soldiers, he will be crucified, the temple curtain will be torn in two, there will be an earthquake, some tombs will open and, subsequently, some dead will be raised to life. A hardened centurion watches it all and declares regarding Jesus, "Surely he was the Son of God!" Yes, indeed he was and is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Lord of all!

Jesus before Pilate

We know that Pilate was reluctant to get involved in the trial of Jesus and Matthew records the custom of releasing a prisoner chosen by the crowd. Pilate is amazed at Jesus' silence and seems convinced that the crowd will choose to release Jesus, not Barabbas. His wife has a dream, where she is convinced of Jesus' innocence and urges Pilate not to get involved with Jesus. Pilate does not listen and the crowd chooses Barabbas. Jesus is flogged and handed over to be crucified. The world behaves like Pilate today, often trying to be diplomatic but being unclear and ineffective. The Church too is in terrible danger of being indecisive and failing to give good, clear leadership.

The Crucifixion

Every person who was going to be crucified, would be flogged first. Because of all the coming and going, Jesus may well have been flogged twice. The treatment handed out by the soldiers would have been abusive and degrading; they strip him and they mock him, they spit on him, they strike him, they put a scarlet robe on him, showing utter contempt for him. They lead him away for crucifixion and force Simon from Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. They place a board over his head with the words, "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS." written upon it. Two thieves are crucified with him and mockery continues from them and also the crowd. They taunt Jesus, urging him to save himself. The world continues today to be oblivious of what happened when Jesus died. Many suffer in our world but this was Jesus, God the Son. Jesus was totally innocent!

Repercussions of Jesus' Death

There is a darkness that comes over the land. This is a strong picture of sin and evil. We can be sure that this was an abnormal time of darkness. It probably provoked terror in some hearts.

Jesus experiences separation from his Father crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus gives up his spirit; he chooses when he will die. This is extraordinary!

Despite the torture and suffering that Jesus endures, he is in control. No one takes his life. He surrenders it when he chooses. Hence, he is not a victim of Roman rule and religious bigotry but one who dies for me in my place; my Saviour!

The Temple curtain is torn from top to bottom. The old covenant is coming to an end. Now access is there, for all to draw near to God through Jesus.

There is an earthquake and some are raised from the dead. This is a powerful foretaste of what will happen one day when all the dead will be raised. The centurion suddenly realises the truth and declares that Jesus truly is the Son of God!

Permission is given by Pilate for Jesus to be buried in the tomb of Joseph from Arimathea. The tomb had never been used and a large stone is rolled over the entrance. A guard is placed at the tomb for fear that the disciples will steal the body. However, soon will come the glorious resurrection of Jesus from the dead!

Points to Consider:

1. Judas is a tragic figure. He is guilty but the priests are equally guilty, as indeed we all are, for Jesus is suffering the consequences of all our sins!
2. The strength of Jesus is phenomenal in that he handled the floggings and some hours upon the cross. He is able to strengthen us too, in our adversities.
3. Abuse, torture, mocking and humiliation are all endured by Jesus, therefore he fully identifies with those who handle such things in their lives. Consider how to apply this to those you minister to, who have suffered.
4. The cry of the centurion shows that he recognises the uniqueness of Jesus. Pray for those who don't know Christ, to come to the same understanding that he did.
5. It is overwhelming to consider that Jesus, who is Almighty God, suffered and died for you and me. Let us reflect how we respond to this truth.

Matthew 28

This chapter describes the resurrection of Jesus, the conspiracy to cover up his resurrection and the Great Commission.

The Resurrection of Jesus

We are told that there was a violent earthquake and that an angel came and rolled back the stone. This was after the earthquake which occurred when Jesus died. There must have been tremendous anxiety and fear, at what we perceive as a momentous event in human history. It took only one angel to roll back the stone and the appearance of this angelic being struck great fear into the hearts of the guards! The Bible also records, at another time, that one angel will chain up the devil. Clearly, angels are extremely powerful and we note their presence at the birth of Jesus, at the temptations of Jesus, at the garden of Gethsemane and, even on the cross, Jesus was aware of angelic presence that he could have called upon to intervene, if he had chosen to do so.

The angel's message to the two women, was that they should not be afraid and that Jesus was not in the tomb but that he had risen. The angel invites the women to see the empty tomb and instructs them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen. It is interesting that the angels that appeared to the shepherds, told them to not be afraid but to go to Bethlehem to see the Saviour that had been born, which they did and then they glorified God for what they had seen and heard!

Jesus meets the women and again tells them to not be afraid. The message that constantly comes from the lips of Jesus in these early appearances, is that they should not be afraid. This is very reassuring for us, because this same Jesus wants to speak peace and hope into our hearts and to take away our fears.

The Conspiracy of the Chief Priests

On hearing that Jesus had left the tomb, the chief priests bribed the soldiers to spread the story that Jesus' disciples had stolen the body. When we look at the facts, this was a ridiculous suggestion. The disciples had fled at the arrest of Jesus and were in hiding. At this time, there was no sense of any of them having the courage to face the authorities and what would they have done with the body anyway?

Even today, people will go to great lengths to deny the miracle that Jesus had died but now has risen from the dead!

The Great Commission

Matthew takes us to a mountain, where the disciples are with Jesus and Jesus is about to ascend into Heaven. At this point, they are still in two minds; there was worship in their hearts but still many questions in their heads. The word 'doubted' which is used, means to hesitate between two beliefs. It is so difficult sometimes, to abandon questioning and to simply trust in Jesus.

Jesus deals with the question of authority. He has the ultimate authority and no one has authority over him, because the Father has entrusted this only to him. From that place of authority, Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all nations." It is important that he uses the word 'disciples'. A disciple is a follower; someone who is a work in progress. Our challenge is to help people become more like Jesus, which is a lifetime of work in us and in others, not just a one-off emotional response.

Matthew gives us a rare mention of the Trinity, as part of discipleship is to be baptised in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Matthew also defines our sphere of service; it is to go into all the world and to reach people of all nations. This global task requires the involvement of the whole church. It is not just for one or two people. We have a massive harvest field to work in! Jesus says that the teaching he has given, must be presented in such a way that it is not just to be noted but it must be obeyed and acted upon. This applies to all of his teaching, not just some of it.

The joy that comes with this enormous task, is to know that Jesus is always with us and that he will never leave us. The job of reaching the world will be accomplished and he is always going to be there, to help us achieve that goal!

Points to Consider:

1. Do we really believe that, in times of great chaos, God is always in charge and working out His purpose? Are we ready to trust Him in the earthquake, realising that even death is conquered?
2. How aware are we, that angels are still doing the work of God and that each one of them is able to demonstrate the immense power of God?
3. The two women were the first to discover that Jesus had risen, then the disciples, then the world. When we spend time with Jesus and receive his words of comfort, are we obedient to his call to then go to others with this gospel?
4. The Great Commission requires planning and thought, because we are to make disciples, not just converts. Do we regularly look at how we work and ask the question, "How well am I fulfilling this commission?"
5. The disciples heard and saw Jesus. Do people see Jesus in us, as well as hear about him from us? We must ask God that they do!