

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF MATTHEW, MARK & LUKE

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SESSION THREE GRAPPLING WITH MATTHEW

1. The Life of the Kingdom Community (Narrative)

Reading: Matthew 13:54-58; 14:22-33; 15:29-31; 16:1-4, 13-28; 17:1-13, 24-27

2. The Life of the Kingdom Community (Teaching)

Reading: Matthew 18:1-35; 19:1-2

3. The Little Apocalypse (Narrative)

Reading: Matthew 19: 3-14, 20:20-28; 21:28-32; 22:1-22, 34-40

4. The Little Apocalypse (Teaching)

Reading: Matthew 23:1-4, 37-39; 24:1-14; 25:1-13, 31-46; 26:1-2

Discussion questions:

How can today's church show itself to be the Kingdom Community?

How should today's church exercise discipline?

1. The Life of the Kingdom Community (Narrative)

Reading: Matthew 13:54-58; 14:22-33; 15:29-31; 16:1-4, 13-28; 17:1-13, 24-27

Matthew is a Gospel about the coming of the Messiah. After a general introduction concerning the genealogy and nativity of the Messiah, Matthew records the ministry of Jesus, dividing his teaching into five sections, each beginning with a section of narrative, followed by a section of teaching and concluding with a verse bringing that section to a close. As there are five of these concluding verses (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1) we deduce there are five blocks of teaching. The first three of these teaching blocks are the Sermon on the Mount, the Commissioning of the Twelve and Parables of the Kingdom. We now consider the fourth teaching block, the Life of the Kingdom Community which, like the three preceding blocks, begins with some narrative.

When Jesus returned to Nazareth, the town where he grew up, people wanted to know the source of his wisdom and miraculous powers. This was more about authority than location. Jesus received wisdom, power and authority from his Father – not Joseph, but God. Sons often followed their father's trade. Joseph was probably what we would call a carpenter/builder. The definite article, '*the* carpenter's son', suggests that there was only one tradesman of this kind in the town. The irony is that they accept his wisdom and miracles and yet reject his claims, taking offence at him.

After Jesus had spent some time alone in prayer, he needed to rejoin the disciples whom he had sent away in a boat. In Roman reckoning, the fourth watch of the night would be between 3.00 am and 6.00 am. When the disciples saw a figure walking on the lake they were terrified. At Jesus' command, Peter walked on the water but when he focused not on Jesus but on the storm around him he began to sink. His faith was strong enough to get him out of the boat but not strong enough in the face of the storm. The climax of the miraculous story is not that the wind died down but the worship of the disciples and their confession 'Truly you are the Son of God' (14:33), which contrasts with the people at the synagogue at Nazareth (13:55). Matthew also provides a summary of other miracles, including healings where, in contrast to the Jewish leaders, even Gentiles 'praised the God of Israel' (15:31).

Jesus often met opposition from the Pharisees and Sadducees, two religious groups that were frequently at odds both theologically and politically. Their request for a sign suggests they could not understand the signs they had already been given. The sign of Jonah is not likely to be a sign they would recognise either. In contrast, at Caesarea Philippi, a small town at the base of Mount Hermon, when Jesus asked the question, 'who do people say the Son of Man is?' Peter replied, 'you are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (16:16). As the first to make such a confession, building the church has started with Peter. Jesus continues that the message of the gospel both binds and looses. Peter accomplishes this binding and loosing by proclaiming the gospel that Jesus is the Christ, a truth that has been revealed to him. However, the time of open proclamation cannot precede the death and resurrection of Jesus, hence, Jesus warns his disciples 'not to tell anyone that he was the Christ' (16:20). This incident marks a turning point as Jesus heads for Jerusalem for the last time.

It is discipleship rather than good works that is rewarded. It appears that the disciples will see the coming kingdom not in its absolute sense, at the Lord's future coming in glory, but in the rapid multiplication of disciples after the day of Pentecost. When Jesus was 'transfigured' (Gk *metamorphoo*) it seems that the disciples were privileged to see something of his pre-incarnate glory (Philippians 2:6-7) and anticipate his coming exaltation (2 Peter 1:16-18; Rev 1:16). Together Moses and Elijah may well summarise the Law and Prophets. The cloud is reminiscent of the *shekinah* glory and also associated with the Exodus. The uniqueness of Jesus is again disclosed and confirmed the disciples' conviction that Jesus was the Messiah.

2. The Life of the Kingdom Community (Teaching)

Reading: Matthew 18:1-35; 19:1-2

The disciples needed to learn about the life of the kingdom community and their question, 'who is the greatest?', gave the Lord Jesus opportunity to teach them. 'The very fact that they asked the question showed that they had no idea at all what the kingdom of heaven was' (Barclay) and is a preoccupation that will continue in the ambitions of James, John and their mother (20:20-23). Answering, Jesus used the solemn introductory formula, 'I tell you the truth,' saying that the disciples must 'change (in the sense of being turned around) and become like little children,' or 'they will never enter the kingdom of heaven'. This 'change' will affect their attitudes – in terms of their self-importance, their attitudes to others, to sin and to service (Price). To enter the kingdom of heaven, the disciples of Jesus must become like children in their humility (cf. the Beatitudes).

The context of the parable of the lost sheep suggests that the point of the parable is that those in the kingdom of heaven must share the Father's concern that none is lost. When one sheep has gone astray, the Father does not reason that he still has ninety-nine left. His concern for the one wandering sheep is so great that he rejoices more over its restoration than over the ninety-nine that do not stray. That said, God's love for the individual is not at the expense of the whole flock but that the flock may be preserved complete.

Sin attacks the kingdom community not only from the outside but also from the inside. When a disciple sins against a fellow-disciple, the proper thing to do is to talk to the offending fellow-disciple privately (see also Leviticus 19:17). The aim must be to win him (or her) over, because the aim of all church discipline is to secure the salvation of fellow-disciples, not to lose them. An individual who needs to speak to an offending fellow-disciple must do so with true humility. If this private approach does not work then it is necessary to involve two or three others (see also Deuteronomy 19:15). It is possible that a fellow-disciple might take more notice of two or three respected people rather than just one person with whom there has been some kind of disagreement or grievance. Part of the essence of being a disciple is following together. When the erring disciple realises that the whole church disapproves then that should cause that disciple to come back into line. To treat someone as a pagan and a tax-collector is not the same as having nothing more to do with them. It is treating that person as being outside of the Christian community so that they might be challenged and ready to be restored to it.

Today, the whole issue of church discipline is difficult. Most of us will have, at some time, been on the wrong end of the tongue of a less-than-humble church member who has decided 'to speak the truth in love', in such a way that has contained little truth and no love. On the other hand, today's church can incline to a situation where anything goes. The church, in this context, is the last resort and must have the final say on what conduct is forbidden to the believer and what conduct is accepted. In other words, it is not the rabbinical teaching that is now authoritative but the decision of the Christian assembly. This is followed by more teaching with another emphatic introduction. The promise about two agreeing is often misunderstood to mean that any prayer in which two believers agree will be answered affirmatively. It is more likely that this statement relates to offender and the offended from the earlier passage. Jesus is spiritually present with the 'two or three' (the smallest possible group) and with all his followers (Matthew 28:20).

The rabbinic tradition was that a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times but not on the fourth time. Big-hearted Peter has clearly learned something from Jesus and offers 'seven times' to which Jesus responds 'seventy-seven times' (a number which implies that keeping count is against the spirit of forgiveness), a depth of mercy indicated by the parable of the unmerciful servant. The fourth teaching block is brought to a close by indicating that Jesus left the region.

3. The Little Apocalypse (Narrative)

Reading: Matthew 19: 3-14, 20:20-28; 21:28-32; 22:1-22, 34-40

Matthew arranges the teaching of Jesus in five blocks, each concluding with a phrase similar to, 'when Jesus had finished saying these things'. The fifth and last of these blocks is the Little Apocalypse, so-named because it is similar in content and style to Revelation. The first teaching block (the Sermon on the Mount), the second teaching block (the Commissioning of the Twelve), the third teaching block (Parables of the Kingdom) and the fourth teaching block (the Life of the Kingdom Community) began with some narrative. Similarly, this fifth and final teaching block 'the Little Apocalypse' begins with a narrative section.

When Jesus was asked a question about divorce, he began by teaching about marriage. As he often did, Jesus spoke about God's ideal before human sin. God himself created humanity to be male and female (Genesis 1:27), the implication, 'for this reason', being that it is man and woman that should be joined in marriage (Genesis 2:24) and become one flesh (Ephesians 5:28-31). There are very few families that are not touched by the awful tragedy and pain of broken marriages. The two competing rabbinic schools had their own regulations about permissible divorces but Jesus does not go down the road of rules and regulations. Instead, Jesus summarises the scriptural teaching on marriage. Moving on to the question of divorce, Jesus notes that Moses did not command it (19:7) but permitted it (19:8). Divorce is not part of the Creator's perfect design. The dangers are either to interpret the scriptures too liberally (even ignoring them all together) and undermine the sanctity of marriage or to interpret the scriptures too legalistically and fall back into the trap of the competing rabbinical schools, who were trying to catch Jesus out.

It is difficult to sum this sensitive issue up briefly. Is it an option simply to divorce a spouse and marry someone else and not sin? No, divorce is not an option to 'legalise' adultery. Is divorce always sinful? The answer must be 'yes'. Is it sometimes the best available option? Sadly, the answer must also be 'yes'. How are we to interpret 'marital unfaithfulness'? It is difficult - it is clearly meant to be something serious and not trivial. Is divorce an unforgivable sin? No. Is a divorce on 'unscriptural grounds' still a divorce? The answer must be 'yes'. Are all divorcees free to remarry? Yes. Should divorcees be free to remarry in church? Now that there are few, if any, pressures on couples to be married, an important consideration is their sense of responsibility and state of heart now rather than a detailed examination of all that has happened in the past but this can only be a provisional response to an extremely difficult subject. It is probably not a coincidence that Matthew records Jesus blessing children immediately after a discussion of marriage. Children are patterns of humility, rather in contrast to the disciples at this point. The kingdom of heaven does not belong to children but to those who are 'like children' (in humility and faith).

Despite Jesus' repeated predictions of his passion, two disciples and their mother are still thinking about privilege, status, and power. Jesus' answer is not severe but shows that they are seeking these things through ignorance. Greatness among Jesus' disciples is based on service. Later, in the parable of the two sons (21:28-32), for the first time Jesus openly made a personal application of one of his parables to the Jewish leaders, saying that those whom the Jewish leaders look down upon will enter the kingdom of heaven if they change their minds and do the father's will, whereas however loudly the religious leaders tell of their 'yes to the father' their righteousness can never be enough. This is not a distinction between Jew and Gentile but between religious leader and repentant sinner. John came preaching God's will about what was right, pointing to Jesus and the righteousness of his kingdom. This theme continues in various parables, including the parable of the wedding banquet where there are some surprises. Jesus does not give political answers to theological questions - it is the things of God that really matter. A disciple must live according to God's will. Both the primary command ('love the Lord your God') and the second concern love. All scripture 'hangs' on them, which means nothing in scripture can be truly obeyed unless these two are observed.

4. The Little Apocalypse (Teaching)

Reading: Matthew 23:1-4, 37-39; 24:1-14; 25:1-13, 31-46; 26:1-2

This teaching comes in two parts, teaching in the temple (23:1-24:2) and teaching at the Mount of Olives (24:3-26:2). Many synagogues had a stone seat at the front where the authoritative teacher sat yet even the teachers who sat there did not live up to what they preached. When Jesus lamented over Jerusalem it tempered the preceding seven woes with compassion. Jesus claimed to be the one who has longed to gather and protect a rebellious nation, like a mother hen gathers and protects her chicks (Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 91:4; Jeremiah 48:40).

Jesus' departure from the temple marked the end of the preliminary teaching that prefaces the much greater part of the fifth discourse from the Mount of Olives. The discourse is full of Old Testament quotations and allusions and is not only very complex but also notoriously difficult to understand. Jesus warns that there will be a delay before the end and that this will include persecution and tribulation for his followers. The exact time of Jesus' return is known only to the Father. Jesus spoke about various things that are signs that he is coming back but although they show that the end is near they do not say how near. Because there is a delay before his return the temptation to follow a false Christ is very real. Despite persecution, before the end, the gospel will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.

The theme of the need to be prepared is explored through a series of parables, the third of which is commonly called 'the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins' (25:1-13). According to the custom of the time, it was normal for the bridegroom and some of his friends to go to the bride's home, where there were various ceremonies, followed by a procession through the streets, after nightfall, to his home. Everyone in the procession would need a lamp. Central to the story is the bridegroom's delay. It is because he is delayed that the foolish virgins had not brought enough oil. The ultimate refusal to admit the foolish virgins shows that, despite appearances, they were neither watchful nor prepared for the coming of the kingdom. It is simply foolishness to leave such important preparation to the last minute.

In the account of the sheep and the goats (25:31-46), Jesus does not say that he is the 'Son of Man' but the whole discourse is a response to the disciples' question, 'what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' (Matthew 24:3). It is clear that Jesus intended the listeners to understand his role as judge at the end of time. 'All the nations' means all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles for, as the gospel of the kingdom of heaven is preached to Gentiles as well as Jews, everyone must stand before the king.

The image of a shepherd separating sheep from goats would have been a familiar one because at night though sheep tolerate the cool night-time air, goats have to be herded together for warmth. Symbolically, the right hand is the place of power and honour. The reason the 'sheep' are welcomed and invited to take their inheritance is that they have served the King's brothers for the King says that doing the deeds to the least of his brothers is the equivalent of doing it to him.

As with the preceding parables, this discourse ends with judgement and condemnation. Hell is here described in ways that are familiar to Jewish readers. Both 'sheep' and 'goats' are admitted or excluded from the kingdom on the basis of how they treated the King and his brothers. The Bible has much to say about caring for the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, sick and imprisoned but the main issue here is not charitable works for the poor but how people respond to the kingdom. The final separation of 'sheep' and 'goats' is a recurring theme in the New Testament. The same word 'eternal' (Gk *aiōnion*) is used to describe both punishment and life.